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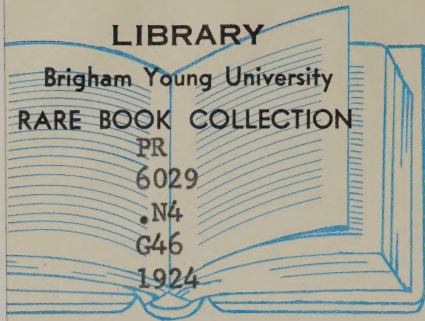
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GHOSTS IN DAYLIGHT

GHOSTS IN DAYLIGHT

By
OLIVER ONIONS

AUTHOR OF
"PEACE IN OUR TIME,"
"WIDDERSHINS,"
ETC., ETC.

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THE ASCENDING DREAM

I

THE ASCENDING DREAM

“ To dream that you are ascending steps denotes danger.”
Popular Belief.

I

A FEW ages ago, on a sunny sea-shore, a young man was building a boat. It was early morning, and grey vapours still dappled the sea, so that now the horizon could be seen, a thin silver thread, and again all was lost beyond the line of glittering surf, no farther away than the young man could have thrown a stone. The surf broke on shining dove-grey sands; then innumerable white boulders strewed the beach; then these became great rocks that formed a talus, and thence the cliffs rose sheer, hundreds of feet, with a thousand sea-birds wheeling and crying about their ledges.

The young man had made a little clearance among the boulders, and on the patch of sand lay his tools and appliances—a flint axe, various other sharpened stones, a few poles and branches for levers and rollers, and, most important of all, the hearth that held his handful of fire. He was a smallish but comely young man, with dark and watchful and brilliant eyes and long black hair. About his middle he wore a skin tied

with twisted sinews, and the strips of hide that shod him patterned the sands as he moved.

His boat was a log that he had claimed from the sea. Many tides had tossed it about, now within swimming-distance, now a speck far away, before a higher tide than usual had lifted it to where he could get at it with his levers and rollers. He hoped he had not offended the sea in thus snatching its log from it. He knew the sea as a creature capable of being offended, but he had long ardently wished for just such a log. Only at certain carefully-chosen times could he swim unaided to the little island of rock hidden in the mists, and he wished to be able to go there at all times. There were delectable fish to be caught there, much superior to those in the pools among the white boulders. And perhaps the fish were not all he coveted. Beyond the rock nothing could be seen from the shore even in clear weather, but there must be something—perhaps more desirable fish still—perhaps another island—perhaps a better home for himself and his than his present one, the crevice high up in the cliffs where the sea-birds floated and screamed.

And so, with the assistance of certain gods he knew, the young man was earnestly fashioning his boat.

He made much of these gods, since he found that by propitiation they could be made to serve him. He was propitiating two of the most powerful of them that morning, the one that watched and winked at him from his hearth on the sand, and that other one, that stirred his long hair, ruffled the line of surf, and carried

the smoke of his fire away over the white boulders. Otherwise the fire would never have consented to be placed in the log's hollow, nor would the wind have driven it as he wished it to be driven. He had his poles and rollers in readiness to alter the log's direction should the caprices of these powers change. By the favour of a third god, who lived in the head of his flint axe, he chipped out the charred wood. The other gods, in the levers and rollers, he allowed to slumber until he wanted them.

At the edge of the cleared patch a young woman also sat. She was sewing a garment of skins, but she gave an occasional glance towards the three naked children down by the water's edge, and from time to time left her needle sticking in her work in order to put more sticks on the fire. She, too, wore a single skin, with a chain of bright shells about her neck, threaded on a plait of her own hair. This still hung in wet points from her tumbling with the children in the surf, and one strand of it encircled her upper arm like an armlet. So lustrous was her skin that it dimly reflected surrounding objects, the gleam of a sunburst through the mists softly lighting a shoulder, the whiteness of a near boulder dimly lurking in a glossy thigh. One breast, too, polished as the head of the young man's axe, gave back the sky overhead.

The young man wished the young woman would look up from her stitching. He knew that at the least unusual movement among the children down by the surf she would have been on her feet, but he, hardly

his own length away from her, could not attract her eyes. But he remembered that she had always been like that, even in the tribe before he had brought her away. Many times his head had turned to watch her, in glade or at cave-mouth, but her head had never turned, though she had wanted to turn it never so much. When he wanted to do a thing he did it, but when she wanted a thing done she had some sort of a magic that made him do it for her.

But just once in a while this magic failed her. For example, she did not wish him to make his boat. When he had spoken of superior fish at all times instead of only occasionally, she had said she hated fish, and, the last time he had swum out for them, had refused them, and had cooked one of the common cliff-top animals for herself instead.

As for his wish to know what lay behind the island, that he had never mentioned to her.

So he furtively watched her, divided between his work and his desire to sit down by her, take her stitching from her, put his head in the skin about her knees, and tell her of something that troubled him.

The thing that troubled him was a dream that he had had ; and he had had it, the same dream, not once, but many times. It had to do with their cranny in the cliff, high up where the sea-birds wheeled. His eyes sought the way up there as he idly moved the embers this way and that in the hollow of his log. As far as the talus of boulders the white stones made a narrow path. Then the path wound in and out among

the great rocks. But where the talus ended and the sheer ascent began, an almost imperceptible snail's track rose up the cliff's face. It zigzagged, made use of the ledges, took in a crannied bush here or a short hand-rope of plaited fibre there, but always rose, until it came to the last flight, which had been cut out with the young man's own axe. Then it ended. A stone at the mouth of the eyrie made the entrance secure against the wild beasts. Inside was their litter, their skins, their fish-hooks and axes, and their winter store of food.

Suddenly the young man came and sat down by the young woman's side. He took her sewing from her, and began to fringe out the damp hair across her shoulders. She made no movement. Then he began to rub the sand from her bare feet. Still she made no response. Then he gave a little tug to her hair that turned her eyes towards him.

The instant her eyes met his they became alive, alert and anxious.

For dumb people still talk, and deaf people still hear, very much as these two conversed—with all their senses save the lacking one. They had very few names for things. He had hardly a name for her. She was the Comfort-thing, but so contrary that she could be ill with good fish, the Soft-to-the-Touch-thing, but so perverse that she could thrive on rank berries when she had a mind. What need, indeed, had they of names, with one god winking and watching them restlessly from the hearth, and another playing about their

bodies and entering their nostrils, and another creeping in at their ears from the line of glittering surf? Even the names they knew they avoided for fear of mischief. The stairs to their eyrie were the Climbing-things (since a man might slip on them), the smooth-worn stump of bush was the Holding-thing (since it might break), and the dream was the Night-thing (since it filled the heart with bodings unknown to the day). Thus their tongues faltered, but their fingers streamed intelligence. Currents of meaning, quicker than light on water, ran back and forth between their eyes. And a few numerals, spaces and times illuminated the rest.

So he told her what had happened so many times while she had slept on the litter by his side.

He was always (in his dream) ascending that snail-track to their home. But whereas, many warm weathers ago, he had stood upon the lower portions of it, since then he had stood higher and higher with each recurrence of the dream. On the night when the cliff-fall had carried away his observation-tree, he had stood on the ledge where they had seen the half-swallowed fish carry the bird back again into the water. On that other night, when the wild cat had scratched at their rock, he had reached the niche where the cliff-god had dislodged the stone that had so narrowly missed her head. Sometime after that he had begun to keep a rough tally, as he did for the births of his children and the days when it was possible to swim out to the rock. Now his tally had begun to frighten him. He

not only knew where he stood (in his dream) now, but where he would stand the next time.

Once or twice she interrupted him. This was to know how many steps remained yet to mount.

“The wolves—that time—over there,” he said.

She remembered. There had been fifty or sixty wolves that time, where he pointed—fifty or sixty steps still to climb.

And again : “As the fish on the stick.”

That, too, was plain. There were perhaps a score of the split and salted fish on the stick in their cliff-larder.

Then, as at another point he made a light gesture with both hands, she started.

Ten fingers ! Ten ! Only ten left !

But apparently even that had been some time ago. There came a point in his story where his bright eyes, following the smoke that flattened out over the shining sands, rested on the children at play. She clutched his arm, and up shot three of her fingers in a swift question.

But he shook his head. Fewer than three——

There are only two numbers fewer than three. Which of these it was appeared when, with a quick movement, he took her into his arms.

She herself was his numeral—the symbol that only a single step now remained between him and the top.

Then, his narration over, their eyes severed, and he continued to sit with his head in the soft scallop between her arm and breast.

As for her, she sat looking blankly before her, her foreknowledge come true. He had offended the sea-god, who was doubtless a kinsman of the god of the Night-thing. Dully she asked him how frequently the Night-thing visited him.

He told her : sometimes in one moon, sometimes in the darkness between the old moon and the new one, sometimes as often as between a sun and the next sun. She had a shiver, and then she pointed abruptly to the boat.

“ That,” she said.

But she felt his head shake obstinately under her arm. He would not have it that it was the boat.

“ That,” she said again. “ His.” And she pointed to the sea, now a sheet of undimmed silver, with a cloudlet of birds about the island-rock in the middle of it. “ How much time, that ? ” Her eyes indicated the boat.

“ Two, three suns. Then plenty of fish. Enough.”

And he sprang lightly to his feet.

But this time it was she who seized him, clasping him by the knees. Her face was piteously upturned.

“ No—no——” she implored him, her hands about his ankles.

Her arms, her eyes, every particle of her, told him how well he was with her, how little need there was to go elsewhere ; but his eyes shone as he put her hands away and lifted her to her feet. By the smoking boat he enfolded her, the Comfort-thing, the Thing-to-

which-he-Turned, but that he would leave in order to see what lay behind the island.

That was several ages ago ; and for suns and for moons, and for warm weathers a-many, first a young woman with three children, then a woman not young with three tall sons, and then an old woman without sons, who lived between two white boulders of the talus because she could no longer climb the ladder where the sea-birds quarrelled and screamed, looked out over the sea, her eyes seeking a speck that never appeared.

II

A few centuries ago a young man stood against a diamond-paned window, poring over a map. One window-bay looked back upon the flagged terrace of the house, but the rest of it was turned to where the park-land dropped, gentle stage by gentle stage, first to meadow, then to pasture, then to sandhills grey with sea-lavender and thyme, and so to the wrinkled silken cloth of the sea. The closet in which the young man stood was his private apartment, and a homely litter filled it, of boots, old hawk-jesses, farm-books, powder-horns and bullet-moulds, and, on the oak table, the lady's light crossbow he had been repairing. Over the stone mantelpiece hung his father's sword and morion, and on the shelf below it was a small mariner's compass.

He was a tallish young man, with close-cropped dark hair and a beard so slight that it would hardly have

been a beard at all but for the razor's careful shaping of it. His head was in dark outline against the window, except for the flat of his brow, which, catching the light as far as the temple, gave his nose an appearance of prominence which properly it had not. His walk through the orchards and coppices had left a few spring-time sheddings on the shoulders of his every-day velvet doublet, and there were traces of garden-mould on his hose.

Across the lawn outside, under a clustered yew, sat the lady for whom he had been mending the crossbow. She was his neighbour, and they were betrothed. Her land, which she would hold in her own right when her mother died, more than doubled his, with holt, chase, mansion, and fifty farms to boot. And she was more than desirable had she not had fifty pence. Half a score of goodly young men were her humble suitors, and would have been glad to see the back of this young man's cropped head and lissom shoulders. She sat at her broidery-frame, and he would have been a backward man at his verse who had not written somewhat in praise of her hands, that passed the needle in and out.

The map that the young man studied he had ridden expressly to Bristol to procure. Riding home again with his treasure in his wallet, he had mused upon the things told him by the old pilot from whom he had procured it. Men had arrived at the East by going West! By the Azores and the old Atlantis of Plato, they had reached the New Found Land, whence to

Cipangu and the Chinese Ocean, according to the map, was but a step. The old pilot had spoken of firedrakes and sirens, and had himself seen the dolphins and whales and the fishes that flew.

The young man left the window, fetched the small mariner's compass from the mantelpiece, and placed it over the star-like compass delineated on the map. It seemed to give the map a different meaning to place his own compass there. Then, north of the trembling needle, he read, "*Here men say the mariner's compass faileth.*" West of that was written, "*Land Unknownen,*" and south of that again, "*Land Unknownen,*" and the magic rest itself must be all but unknown, so few had ventured there.

But what fame to be even the fourth or fifth to venture! What service even to follow! And what rich profit for himself, did he need it, lay through that gateway of the Azores!

All that day he had spent among his orchards and gardens, giving directions. The day before had been passed among his horses and hawks. The day before that he had ridden after the deer—it was then that the accident had happened to the crossbow. And in the intervals he had sat at his mistress's feet, or talked with her mother. This was his life, and he showed diligence in it. He knew that his men said of him that not even his father had been so good a master as he.

Perhaps not; but—the young man glanced at his father's sword and morion again. Elsewhere in the house were other swords and harness, handed down by

his line, that reached back older than the yew-tree, back into the unrecorded mists. Doubtless these forbears of his had not always had the praise of their hinds ; but had they no other praise ? Had they lived in vain because there were gaps in their fences and blight on their fruit-walls ? Were these things all ? Must a man go on year after year, planting, farming, keeping accounts, and rubbing his hands as his rent-roll grew ? Were men to say of him, when he was old, no more than that he had been a careful husbandman ?

Questions such as these had troubled him ever since that visit to Bristol. Ah, those ships, those disturbing ships ! They had lain there by the quay as it were asleep, breathing lightly to the tides that lifted them ; but what must they be awake—lifeless things, yet living by every pulse and sense of a hundred men, undying things, since when one hundred passed another hundred took their places ? Ah, the queenliness of them ! He had descended into their dark depths, he had ascended into their tops ; and at night, in his bed in the inn, he had dreamed of them.

And he had not ceased to dream of them since. Once a month, once a week, or oftener, a certain dream had come back to him, always the same, yet each time slightly different. He had dreamed he stood on a ship's ladder of tarred rope, looking aloft. And at first he had stood just above the chains, no more than a drop to the deck ; and then he had stood higher, a dangerous drop ; and then he had mounted higher still, beyond all thought of dropping. That was all

he remembered of his dream—that slender, narrowing ladder he was for ever mounting, with the manhole through the topcastle floor above his head, that sooner or later he knew he must enter.

Suddenly, seeing that the tambour-frame beneath the yew stood deserted, the young man folded his map. He had something on his mind that caused him to walk slowly, and he walked more slowly still as he left the closet, passed along the sunny-shafted corridor, and sought the terrace.

She was approaching, with her mastiff by her side. She had a small and imperious face, the hand beneath the ivy-green sleeve had dimples where its knuckles should have been ; and her white ruff enclosed her proud neck as if it had been the corolla of an arum-lily.

He took her by one of the dimpled hands, and without speaking led her to the terrace-end, where a stone seat stood, not far from the window of his own cabinet. Her ivy-green gown seemed a continuation of the ivy of the wall, which as richly enhanced her young face as if it had been one of the dark backgrounds of the portraits in the house. She sat down, and the mastiff dropped heavily and lazily at her feet.

He had resolved to tell her of his determination without further delay. He loved her ; he knew that she did not go a-begging ; and if she would not wait, so much the worse. He must entreat her to wait. As for her begging him to stay, that small face was not that of a beggar of anything.

As if she had known without telling why he had brought her there, she was the first to speak.

"So do you go, or do you stay, Edmund?" she asked him.

He answered less promptly. "If I go I shall come back."

"Nay, but plain speaking. If I am to wait I must know for how long. I cannot be endlessly plagued with suitors."

In spite of his anxiety, he smiled. "That you will be, if they are of my mind about you."

"And what is your mind, if a maid may ask?" she rejoined. "At Christmas you would marry. Half way to Easter you would marry, not a woman, but a ship. At Easter, blessed be Ovid! the ship had turned into a woman again. And now it is, 'If I go I shall come back.' This is some chameleon of a mind!"

It was true; but that was before his dream had taken possession of him. It was the dream, that hitherto he had concealed, that he had resolved to tell her now.

He began to do so.

As he talked he held her dimpled hand. This was well, for her face, proud as a star, would be the last of her sweet assembly to betray her. What her face did not do the fingers that rested in his did. He felt their quick tremor, that told him truer of her thoughts than the voice in which she presently interrupted him.

"Between the ship and the lady one hardly know

where to have you," she said lightly. "Do you take your ship by the hand, or have I shrouds—shrouds, marry!—the tarry kind, I would say, not the kind it's early enough to think of yet!"

He shook his head. Her tongue might jest, but the hand in his did not.

"Then if you are climbing your mistress thus, what kisses has she for you in the topcastle?" she rallied him again. "In truth I should like to see your ship, tarry bower and all!"

Again he shook his head, kissing her hand.

"Oh, but my mastiff will tell me as much as this hand-licking will do! Come, I will be your soothsayer. You stood first at the hem of her petticoat, her deck I should say. Then, God help us! you had her by the waist-ribbon. When has she promised the other favour?"

At his reply her face almost followed the example of her hands.

"When I have had the dream once more," he said in a low voice.

Suddenly she put her laughing all away. "Nay, but Edmund, this is foolishness," she said falteringly. "Let us walk. A dream is but a dream."

But he drew her back by the soft hand. It had rested upon his knee, where the garden-stains were, but, remembering certain verses he had written to that hand, he removed it from the soilure and placed it against his breast. It seemed to clutch softly at his heart.

He had not thought to feel her tremble thus. Could it be that she would stoop—beg him to stay?

“And so,” he said, “I can plant trees and grow old watching them, or I can do this other. But if I stay I might not live, and to go is not to die, sweetheart.”

This it was that brought her starry pride down like a meteor—the secret thought that he might plant, not trees, but children, and grow old with them growing about him to continue his line. A catch came in the throat with the white ruff. She turned to him eyes in which tears trembled. They broke down her cheeks.

“Ah, Edmund, if you must go, then go; but think of me here! I love only you, but the days will pass, and I shall not forget, but only to remember, always only to remember, is bootless. I shall remember your face, but other faces will be nearer. I shall remember your voice, but other voices will be at my ear, perhaps saying words that you have said. My mother will die and I shall be alone. Then they will come, the others, with their gifts and their suits, and who knows but I shall yield? . . . And as for that,” she raised her eyes with hatred to the sea, “what trees will you plant there, or what crops sow, or what fruits gather, or horses ride, or music hear, or lips kiss?—Edmund, Edmund! Go if you must—but stay—stay with me—stay!——”

Her fingers, snatching at the points of his doublet, wove a net of points and fingers, as if to hold him. And his virgin beard moved about her hair. But his eyes were on the silky, seductive sea. Far away, appearing from behind a near thorn, a moth-like shape

could be seen. It did not seem to move when he watched for its moving, but slowly, slowly it crept away from the hawthorn-twigg. It was a ship, westward bound.

And so another young man, as the saying is, sold a farm and went to sea ; and another young woman remained alone to manage her estate, and to promise her clustering suitors that she would choose among them when her tapestry was finished, and to pick her work out again at night, and to lose her mother, and to grow old herself, but never too old to read, though with failing eyes, the verses he had left her :—

“ Ah, hadde I *but* an Indies gained—
You *but* an Orient given—
Againste your breste I hadde remained
Nor dreamed another heaven !
But in such huge excess you give
When you youre selfe bestowe
That, sweetlie-gorged, the more I have
The hungrier I doe growe.

Turne o'er those flowers youre fingers thridde ;
Their silken rootes appeare
Alle thrummes and knottes, the whiche are hidde
Beneath, for meaner care.
The Vaunte of Honour's yours alone,
Not worthienesse nor debte,
But skyewarde trumpets vainlie blowne,
A crested burgonet,

That askes the arrowe, claims the stroke,
And hides the wounde awaye,
As you the thrummes and endes doe cloke
Beneathe youre tambour-traye,

And bringes you nothings back againe,
Nothings againe but this—
A dint that iron broke in twaine,
But softe as is youre kisse.”

III

A few years ago, in the marble court of the Ralli Hotel, a young man and a young woman were having tea. They sat in a corner a little apart, but had a clear view of the avenue between the tables, where couples hesitated and one-stepped and jazzed to the cacophony of an Ethiopian band. The court was cool as an aquarium; its lighting, too, partly masked behind sconces and cornices and partly “borrowed” by means of cunningly-contrived glass, suggested some luxurious and artificial tank into which neither white daylight nor electric glitter penetrated; and its jazzing fishes and the water-flora seated at its tables were London’s loveliest women.

The head-waiter himself had brought them tea, for Riccardo seldom left Reggie Asshe to underlings. For “doing him” as well as even the Ralli can do a wealthy young man, Riccardo received gifts in due season of pheasants, trout, hothouse fruit, and, more than all, an occasional whisper, not to be spread about for fear of spoiling the market. As a result of these whispers Riccardo backed, or refrained from backing, one of Reggie’s horses. And as Reggie knew about horses as well as owning them, Riccardo was well on the way to managing an hotel of his own.

Reggie Asshe was six-and-twenty. St. James's Street booted and spatted him, Sackville Street made his coats and Savile Row his trousers, Piccadilly provided his hats, and the parting of his dark hair had been fixed by his club barber with as much care as if it had been Ordnance-datum. His hat, cane and gloves were in the cloakroom, his Rolls-Royce outside in Pall Mall. The car could take him to his aeroplane-hangar in thirty-five minutes. He had done it, at night, when the roads were empty, in twenty-and-a-half.

The girl by his side was pouting under her coral-coloured bucket hat with the tiny threaded flowers about it. She seemed, as she would have expressed it, "fed." The toe of one pink jujube of a shoe fretted against the table leg, and her ice was untouched before her. His eyes were quick and humorous as he rallied her, but there was more of purpose than of humour about his mouth, which, when he spoke, hardly seemed to open sufficiently to let the words out.

"But the prize, dear kid—look at the per-rize!" he was saying, as if he had not most of the prizes the world could offer without lifting a finger. "Ten thousand isn't to be sneezed at these days, believe *me*!" He pronounced the last word as if it had been French. "A Bradbury's gone before you can say good-bye to it, and here's you turning up your nose at three-and-sixpenny ices! Now don't go upsetting the works," he continued, as the pink jujube made another movement that slightly shook the table. "Looks bad in

the afternoon—Riccardo'll be telling you to take more soda with it. Cigarette ? ”

But the girl was not to be put off so. She was stretching her gloves into a hard narrow strip between her fingers. One of the fingers wore an engagement ring.

“ You know the money's nothing at all to do with it,” she broke out. “ You'll soon have spent nearly as much as that on the beastly thing. How much did the machine cost you for a start ? ”

“ Dunno,” he replied indifferently. “ Haven't got the bill in yet. I hate flying other people's busses.”

“ You flew them all right—before,” she answered in a failing voice.

“ Not across the Atlantic, dear child,” he replied with a sudden compression of his mouth.

She was thinking of that “ before ” of which she had spoken, when he had flown aeroplanes not his own. She was only two-and-twenty, but many a two-and-twenty knew, a year or two ago, what she knew—knew what it was to stand, suddenly white, gazing at the unopened telegram, which, when opened, was merely from a boot- or dressmaker, and not the thing so sickeningly feared. Events had taught England's women to keep their hearts and expressions well in hand. Tenderness was a dangerous thing when there were only a few hours or a few days for a theatre or two, a lunch or two, a dance, a Medical Board, and back to the inferno again. No good “ asking for it.” Orders were orders, and England's women, a few years ago, did not make them any harder than they were.

But nobody had given him orders about this, his latest adventure. He was doing it to please himself. Even the reasons he did condescend to give were camouflage. He didn't want the prize. He didn't want a comfortable billet with a commercial company. He didn't want to write a book or to lecture about it, and as for the services to science and civilisation they made all the chat about, he wouldn't have missed a dinner or a theatre for either. He just wanted to do it because he jolly well wanted to do it.

And as for letting "those other blokes" get in first—the Americans—she knew that he would be the first to grasp the hand of the sportsman who beat him.

He sprang to his feet as an old general in mufti made his way through the jazzing couples towards them. The general shook him warmly by the hand, but made a gesture of refusal of the chair Asshe placed for him.

"No, I mustn't stop. I'm with some people over there. You're getting away any time now, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir, with any luck. Off to Ireland to-night."

"Everything all right?"

"I think so, sir. Don't see why I shouldn't do it, bar accidents."

"Well, I know you don't mind an old Moses like me envying you young Joshuas a bit. We've done what we could. I hope they won't mob you out of sheer joy when you get to the other side. Au revoir, Asshe—best of luck——"

And the old general, sighing a little, but thanking his God he had been allowed to live to see what he had seen, was lost among the dancing couples again.

But the interruption had broken the current of Asshe's thoughts. He sat down again. He was dropping his fiancée presently and going on to dine with some men, and this was their good-bye. It was rather rotten to rag her. He glanced at her as she sat moodily stretching the gloves.

He hoped for her sake that he should be able to do it; anything else he could have given her would merely have meant writing out a cheque. It was largely swank on her account that had made him lavish money on his aeroplane, care on his preparations. His tail was well-up, so was his navigator's, the weather was ideal, and so forth . . . still, it was the Atlantic and its leagues he was pitting himself against, and he knew far too much to make light of them. The chances remained against him. And it would no more have occurred to him to tell her of a certain dream he had had than to have discussed petrol-tanks that leaked in the air or the precise effects of a direct hit.

This dream, that would rather have put the wind up her, had been curious in its way. It had begun many months ago, with his dreaming that he was out for the height-record; and at first he seemed to remember that his altimeter had stood at something like eight thousand metres. He would have thought nothing of this dream had it not presently occurred again, this time with the altimeter at eight thousand five hundred.

Then it had come again, and again after that, with the reading each time higher than the last. The record was something over 30,000 feet, and he now stood pretty close to that figure. He had refused to admit even to himself that the beastly dream was becoming something of a nightmare, but he hoped it would keep off till he got away on his flight, as it left him rather a rag the morning after.

And if, as he fancied he had heard somewhere, these ascending dreams were unlucky, all the more reason she should know nothing about it.

"Do smoke or something," he said presently. "No hurry—we've half an hour yet."

As she took the cigarette she lifted her troubled eyes to his.

"Can't I come over to Ireland to-night with you? Nancy Burrowes would come with me—I could ring her up from here——"

"No-can-do, darling," he replied promptly. "I shouldn't have any time to spare, and you'd only be in the way. You be practising the 'Conquering Hero,' and then when I come back you can start buying your ter-rousseau."

"Can't I see you at the station to-night?"

"Wouldn't do. Might be blotto. I say, what about a couple of Martinis now?"

Again the gloves were stretched, again the pink jujube of a shoe poked at the table. More than ever he was glad he had not told her of that dream. He could see that she was full up to the back teeth already.

Then, quite openly, he took her hand, lightly dandling the fingers that lay limp over the arm of her chair. He bent over her.

"Little boots full of sand, darling, eh? I tell you it'll be quite all right. You do your little God-talks every night—you know—make Reggie a good boy and let him fly the Atlantic—and I say, don't forget to have a bit on *Eclair*—what a jape if I could pull off the Cup and the Atlantic too! Where's Riccardo? We'll drink to it . . . Riccardo, two Martinis, and then the bill——"

He scrawled his name on the back of the bill, and put the little glass into her hand.

"Good 'ealth—say good 'ealth—stiff lip now," he said, touching the glasses.

Obediently she said it after him; and then suddenly she put the glass down on the table and flung her gloves after it. She rose, and without a word held out her hands to him. For England's women had learned that too—that when you live on the edge of a volcano the only thing to do is to dance. You can't alter the volcano—you can make yourself and everybody about you miserable—so why not make the most of life while it lasts? Her "little God-talks" would fill her heart no less that those small pink jujubes of her feet moved to the cacophony of the Ethiopians' banging and blaring. Whether she ever saw him again or not, at any rate she had him now——

He, too, had sprung laughing to his feet.

"Esker noo jazz?" he said blithely.

“ Yes, old thing—come on,” she said hurriedly.

And hand in hand they chasséed towards the space where the dancers turned and pointed and poised.

And so, not an age or two ago, nor a century or two ago, but as it might have been yesterday, another young man went off the deep end, leaving another young woman to pester the Admiralty, and to look haggardly down the lists, and to ache for wireless-messages that never came, until the rolling months told her that all was useless and that she waited in vain.

There is no dream that has not been dreamed before.

And another young man will be dreaming the same dream to-morrow.

THE HONEY IN THE WALL

II

THE HONEY IN THE WALL

Qu'es la morso
Que nous forço
De belà vers ta cremour
Se lou mèstre
Dóu celèstre
Noun t'a facho pèr l'amour ?

Frédéric Mistral : " A Ève."

I

THEY found it in the fragment of Norman wall just across the grass-court—twenty pounds weight and more of it, the labour of the bees of none of them knew how many years. It was packed away in a cavity as long as a man's arm, and in order to get at it they had to fetch a ladder, to hack down the masses of ivy, and to clear away the grass and valerian and wallflower from the wall-top. Clot after clot it was taken out, unsightly lumps, black as pitch, caked and crusted with earth and scurf and bits of mortar. But the house-keeper cut and scalded the outer grime away, and there was enough of the stored sweetness of long-vanished flowers to fill the row of waiting jars.

Then they gathered up and burnt the ivy and the wallflowers, but left the gap in the wall for people to see whence the honey had been taken.

The Abbey guests had waved to Gervaise to come and see, but she had remained where she stood, in the window-recess of the little picture-gallery, looking down on them. It was one of the days when she wondered what they were doing with guests in the house at all. Guests! Who were they to have guests? As if, in the pass to which things had come, they, she and her mother, could afford to entertain! Oh, yes, things might look very well on the surface. The Abbey made a stately showing there on its rounded hill, with its farmlands about it (but farmed by somebody else), its grass-courts between the stubs of its Norman towers, the ruins of its refectory walls, the twisted chimney stacks and stepped gables of the house proper, and, for timber, oaks that were a county's glory making hillocks upon the hill behind. People passing in Ford cars or on bicycles or afoot turned to look at its widespread magnificence.

But sometimes a car drew up at the great gates and somebody descended from it who was not a guest. They were hardly guests, those people who came by appointment from Spinks' or Christies' or somewhere else in King Street or Pall Mall. And it was Gervaise who received these strangers. Sometimes she spent whole days with them—estate agents, cataloguers, valuers, photographers, minions of one sort and another. She talked to them civilly when she could. When she could not she fell back on her mother's unvarying plaint:

“Spread the rest out a bit—don't take it all from

one room—leave it as nearly the same to look at as you can—but you must, you must find the money!”

The money, Gervaise reflected bitterly as she stood in the little picture-gallery! Money for what? For accumulated debts, running expenses, repairs? For nightmare taxation, the overdraft at the bank, interest on mortgages, first, second and third? Pah! Little as she knew about these things, she knew that it would take a staff of lawyers and accountants, and something in the nature of a Consolidation Act, before the problem could be as much as touched! And it was no good talking to her mother. Her mother always made such aimless haste to agree with everything she said.

“Yes, darling, I know, I know!” Lady Harow would murmur, moving the patience-cards on the little padded table or putting another jig of the large dissected puzzle into its place. “It’s too dreadful! But we’ve shut up all the north and west parts, and even the billiard-room when there isn’t anybody here. We only live in one teeny corner of it. There used to be twelve gardeners when you were a tot and now there’s only one, and the Giles boy. You do so much yourself, darling that you are——”

Yet, with the vines choking under the glass, and the jungles called gardens untouched since the beginning of the war, and wood and iron perishing for want of paint, and half a dozen of the houses’ eyes put out where windows had mysteriously broken themselves—with at least one chimney stack unsafe, and cattle

straying on the lawns, and the remaining domestics to pay and feed, and those appalling letters of threat or demand—in the face of all this her mother still had guests !

“ Yes, darling, I know, I know ! It’s terrible ! But it’s only Freddy and Philip and darling Pam ! They perfectly understand ! Why, Pamela says she won’t come if she isn’t allowed to do her own room, and it’s so long since we’ve seen dear Philip——”

And now Pamela and Philip and Freddy and the rest were waving up to her from the court below, calling her to come and see the honey they had found in the wall.

Gervaise turned abruptly away. It seemed to her that in a very little while they might be glad of that honey as mere food.

II

It was only a small gallery in which she stood, three diamonded windows long and not more than half a dozen strides across. (The other pictures were—that is to say they had been—at the place in Ireland.) It was on a side of the house far removed from the occupied quarters, and, except for the pictures, was bareness itself. Its carved stone fireplace was yawning and empty, and the single piece of furniture the apartment contained, a shallow sofa, was covered with a holland dust-sheet, that hid its contours and trailed on the floor. The mantelpiece had nothing on it but

a broken keyhole-plate and an empty box that had held kitchen matches. Thank goodness, in that clean country there was little dust.

But the walls facing the diamonded windows showed ravages worse than dust. They were hung with a crimson rep material, and on them the results of her mother's "spacing out" showed indeed. When you move an object that has stood for a long time on grass, you get a patch of dead and de-chlorophyllled white ; but ah, the wounds, crimson and recent, where the hatchet had fallen on that gallery ! . . . Gervaise had done what she could, but a smaller picture cannot be made to cover the space of a larger one. Here it was a flap of a wound shaped like a carpenter's square. A corresponding carpenter's square, but in reverse, showed a little farther along. And between the two the four Raeburns had hung.

Raeburns ! Four of them, no fewer ! That small gallery had once been as rich as that !

And now the wall showed no more than a couple of tedious Zoffanys, a Sir Peter on either side of them, a hurried gathering-together of anything in a frame from a cabinet or corridor, and those cruel-looking carpenter's squares, like red incisions for a graft. These were all—these and the " Artist Unknown," the full length Lady Jane, that hung in the very middle of the wall.

Gervaise stood indifferently before the Zoffanys and the Sir Peters. They were trite, without poignancy, mere occupiers of that once-glorious space. But she

was never quite calm in the presence of the Lady Jane. That always came near, a little too near, as if Gervaise herself had not skipped very many stages in the direct line of her blood. Brown and blackened like sodden winter leaves it was, and, like those same leaves skeletonised, minutely varnish-cracked from top to bottom and from side to side of its frame. Wintry, too—wintry as the family fortunes—were the rigid galloons of cramped bodice and stuffed sleeves, their gold now no more than dying flowers on a December wall. Yet two features, yellowed like old harpsichord keys, still stood palely out. These were the lace-cuffed, taper-fingered hands, one of them holding a tiny valentine of a handkerchief; and the second feature was the face in its angular card-castle of linen. The picture was unglazed, and these portions of it came forward. But they did not come, so to speak, equally forward. So much had vanished beyond recall. If ever there had been pink on those cheeks or living glint on those bony brows, not a trace now remained. All had gone with the fugitive pigment. And at the same time the lashless eyes had darkened to round balls of bitumen black. It was as if the paint had changed chemically and simultaneously in two directions, the one a blanching away to nothing, the other to the night that had swallowed up the “Artist Unknown” and his sitter alike.

Gervaise was twenty-six, and, if pride of bearing be a sin, in Sheol already. And her beauty but thrust her down deeper. The rough country skirt above the

flat-heeled brogues, the knitted leaf-brown jumper, showed the hips and shoulder-lines and breasts of that woman-form that has been padded and veiled, compressed and overlaid through the ages, but that remains to-day, as it will still be to-morrow, the same that Adam, waking, saw. The shapeless felt hat framed the resentful dark eyes and the scornful mouth, scornful of the whole dying place about her, scornful of itself that it should betray that it cared . . . all this in the light of the gallery so even and secondary that it filled every corner like the air itself, without a shadow even under the sheeted couch, without a shadow even where the decorated fire-back disappeared behind the wall. For it was the borrowed, honey-coloured light reflected from the Norman wall across the grass-court. No flashing, no dazzling ; only the equable light on those walls of red rep, their scars, the thin line where Gervaise's soles met the floor, and every hair and lash of the lovely turbulent face distinct within the hollow of the shabby felt hat——

It was another of the days when she hated the Lady Jane. She hated her for her fixity, her achieved unchangingness, the mockery in her jet-black following eyes. Change—she ! What had *she* known, living in the times before these ? Had she been in Gervaise's place, Gervaise in hers ! It is all very well not to change when nothing changes about you, but it is another matter when strangers come from King Street or Pall Mall, gash your walls, pay you money that you must immediately pay out again, and then depart !

Gervaise knew very well that other pictures would have to follow the Raeburns. The solitary Sir Joshua downstairs would have to go. The moving little thing in her own sitting-room, that somebody with spectacles and a magnifying-glass had said was not a Watteau, would have to go. Perhaps the Zoffanys and the Sir Peters would go too.

But the Lady Jane would stay. Dealers did not commonly pay large sums of money for "Artists Unknown."

And Gervaise believed very little in the woman herself either. Strait-waistcoated enough she might look up on the wall there, with those tapering fingers holding the handkerchief and the unshaded eyes dark-dead in a white-dead face—virtuous enough if you could trust the look of her—but Gervaise didn't. In spite of that card-castle of a headdress and the trussed-up breasts and the mouth a mere black brush-thread where the red had been, Gervaise wouldn't have trusted her an inch. She didn't believe in the shape of those handkerchief-dropping fingers. She didn't believe that the foot in that bodkin-case of a shoe had never pushed at a door it should not have pushed at. She didn't believe that those pitchy eyes had never softly glanced, though they only stared now. Great-great-great-Somebody the Lady Jane mustn't tell Gervaise that. . . . True, she might have had her head chopped off for it. But then she had not had her head chopped off. She had been circumspect in her day. And in any case she had not had to stand by while they photographed and

valued, nor to listen, in library or muniment-room, to their flat voices saying :

“ Any special feature ? Charles the First ? Priest’s Hole, what ? Anything a bit out o’ the common—that’s what gets the nibbles——”

That was what got the nibbles from these millionaires from Whitechapel and this option-chivalry of Palestine——

Yes, things had been simpler for the woman on the wall there, whom Gervaise sometimes hated and never, never believed in——

“ Gervaise ! Gervaise ! ”

Again they were calling her from the grass-court below.

But she kept away from the window in order that they might think she was no longer in the gallery. For Freddy Lampeter had called too, and there were times when Freddy Lampeter troubled her more than all her troubles put together.

III

They were not to be seen when she returned to the inhabited portion of the house. Only her mother was there, with her soft grey hair piled high as a guardsman’s bearskin over her finely-tooled features, smiling at the large jigsaw-puzzle that at present resembled a map of Iceland in its shallow box.

“ I thought you’d gone out with the others,” she smiled, looking up. Then, looking down again, but

still smiling, she added, "Would you draw the blind just one inch, darling?"

"Jane will have to go," said Gervaise abruptly, returning from the adjustment of the blind.

"Jane go!" Lady Harow echoed in mildest surprise, but this time without looking up from the puzzle. "But you can't possibly get rid of another servant—and the Wyburghs coming next week——"

"I don't mean Jane the housemaid. I mean the portrait."

"Oh! . . . But never mind about it now. You look tired. Go out and have a good blow. I think they said they were going past Giles's."

"I'd better write about it now. I do hope they don't send that young man with the spots again."

"Sweetheart," Lady Harow murmured to the puzzle, "do take a short rest from things! You'll wear yourself out. Did you see the honey? Such a mass! They brought it in for me to look at. There should be enough to last the winter."

The beautiful lips were pursed. "I don't think I shall be here for the winter, mother."

"What? Not Switzerland, my own! Those foolish Swiss! They got across with the French during the war—so unwise of them, with all these German places one can't possibly go to—I've been reading about it——"

"Switzerland!" The tone was too tired to be impatient. "Shall I never make you see, mother?"

"But I do see, darling! *Must* we sell more

pictures? Is there nothing else? There seem to be cabinets and cabinets full of things—or the trees——”

“ I think the Lady Jane.”

“ But, my sweet—is she valuable? ”

The words seemed to slip out of themselves, yet not without a certain impact of concentration.

“ I really don't know! They can have her for nothing if they'll only take her away! ”

Lady Harow's arched brows rose to the springing of her tower of hair.

“ My precious! . . . Now you know this is only one of your moody-moodies, and they're so bad for you! Now do run away and have a blow. I think they said past Giles's. Do you see a piece anywhere with a little bit out like this? ”

Gervaise's mother turned to the puzzle again.

Gervaise went out, but only to enter the house again a few minutes later by another way. She passed to her own small sitting-room—the room she still retained, with a key, thank heaven, to turn in the door when things got too much for her. But she did not sit down. From a drawer she took a large cluster of other keys, ringed and tabbed and lettered and numbered. Then, passing out again, she locked the door of her room behind her.

She knew that what her mother called her “ moody-moodies ” were not good for her. But Lady Harow's unvarying prescription—to go out and have a blow—never did any good. On the other hand, by precipitating matters, a ramble through the vast house often

did. When a thing cannot be avoided it is best to face it and get it over.

She had always felt the house to be much more hers than her mother's. Switzerland, the Riviera, London, Normandy, Scotland—this had been her mother's itinerary as long as the family fortunes had stood the expense ; but Gervaise had always been dragged unwillingly at her heels, and her heart had always lifted again at the first glimpse of the Abbey on its rounded hill. The house was as much a part of her as her bones were. And—though not lately—she had had dreams about its labyrinthine windings. Maze enough it was as it stood in its actuality, with its hundreds of real doors, its dozens of real passages, its solid staircases. These things were the house itself. But in her dreams all had been strangely and adventurously enlarged. The very fabric of the Abbey had been a theme on which the oddest variations had been played. She had crept (in her dreams) through gullet-like apertures low down in walls, always remembering that this was not the first time she had passed through them, always knowing they would issue into some other chamber, which also she would remember the moment she saw it. She had found herself (in her dreams) in sheeted rooms (and, dreaming or waking, one set of rooms or another always was sheeted)—bedroom after bedroom with furniture piled on the stripped beds, sitting-rooms turned into lumber-rooms, through dream-known doors into chambers completely empty . . . and so (when the moment of waking came) through

yet another door of baize or leather, into a staircase all at once part of the daily world again, with maids moving about, ordinary hats and crops and sticks on the stands, and a bright square of grassy court, where puppies rolled and mats lay out in the sun.

And besides being thus shiftingly mapped, the place had been peopled too. The curious thing was that between the mapping and the peopling was a certain correspondence. Just as those chambers had been—what shall one say?—darkly expected, recognised the moment they were seen, and another getting ready to be recognised after that, so the people were imminently familiar. Awake, she could not remember one of them. Until the very moment of dream-meeting she did not quite remember them. But once met they were centuries old and known. She was not in the least afraid of these guessed-at people of her dreams. Curiously, the vanishing of their fringes when her eyes opened again gave her far more fear.

But the last dream, either of people or place, was some time ago. She had had other things to think about. Especially she had Freddy Lampeter to think about.

She thought of Freddy as she stood in a preposterous apartment that extended over half a dozen rooms below. It was a ballroom, with three chandeliers like breaking crystal rockets. Sofas were dwarfed by the walls they stood against, and a long row of southward windows looked out over hills of softly-rolling arable, farmed to their tops. And the scorn died away out of

her face. She forgot for a moment the secret of that Abbey on its rounded hill—the weight of its taxation, its looming foreclosures, the ways and means of its maintenance. She knew that it might end by overwhelming her. But she forgot that in the thought of Freddy Lampeter.

She had no illusions about him. She was aware that he was a butterfly, here, there and everywhere, passing from this house to that, his name now lightly linked with one girl's name, now as lightly with that of another. Oh, Gervaise could guess his kind—she was no fool! And, to be fair to him, it was not all his doing. They ran after him, could not leave him alone. But for some restraining quality in her that they apparently had not, Gervaise would have run after him too. She didn't like to think how often she had been on the point of it. That was why at those times she had answered him curtly or not at all. Obviously it was his gift. She saw through him clearly. But she was not at the beck of a finger.

And yet, when she had seen through him, and shown him that she saw through him, there he would be at her side again, always as if by some happy accident, murmuring smilingly and understandingly, as if everybody but they two were puppets in an amusing show and he and she privately commenting behind the scenes of it all. Yes, it was his gift. Half the girls she knew probably had their share of it. But somehow even the sharing made the thought of it none the less sweet.

Tall mirrors behind her reflected the showery chandeliers and the arable across the smooth valley. Turning, she saw herself in one of them, and advanced to meet herself.

Those others—Blanche Chayter, for example? Blanche had her forthright attractions, open and declared and made the most of; but had Gervaise not beauty too? That body of hers in the rough skirt and leaf-brown jumper, was it not a Toledo blade for suppleness and temper? The arrogant face within the shabby hat, was it inferior in loveliness to Blanche's? And what treasures, disordered it might be, the bitter with the sweet, the dross with the gold, the honey caked with mortar and scurf and chaff, did not her tumultuous heart contain? Standing before the mirror she asked herself this.

But she turned away from the mirror again and walked with quickened pace out of the ballroom. Too well she knew the answer to her own question. The honey was there, but it was walled up, and it was she herself who was unable to release it. She could give of her care, her brain, the labour of her body, but not of her inmost heart. It had always been so. Others might laugh through their lives, cease from thinking, or never have begun. They might turn their backs upon burdens, leaving anybody to shoulder them who cared. They might be all open honeybags, for Freddy or somebody else to sip. But not she. She was different. Why?

Entering a corridor that turned away from the smil-

ing sweep to the south, she saw them in the distance, trooping down the hill from Giles's.

IV

They had been what they called "Maying," though the month was July and the time afternoon. That meant that they had straggled in two and threes across the fields, picking flowers, throwing stones, running short races, hindering Giles's men at their work, dropping sixpences into the moneyboxes of the Giles's children. They were still laughing at these things when Gervaise entered the drawing-room.

"Do pull yourself together, Pamela—this is merely absurd!" somebody admonished a buttercup-haired girl, who had laughed herself into semi-hysterical tears and was still unable to stop.

"Deplorable! Don't take any notice of her!"

"Pamela!"

"Really, Pam!" they scolded the uncontrolled girl.

Freddy Lampeter was watching indulgently from among cushions. His small dark head was against the sunny window-opening, and the spare spread of his shoulders was emphasised by the position of his arms along the couch-back. The light hid the little healed wound at the left corner of his mouth—the little pucker that always made Gervaise think of him as two men, the one whose letters came at wide intervals from places where things of that kind were to be picked up, the other who might have lounged among cushions all his life. His soft voice too always seemed the softer

for the scar, and it was with an irony that she took no trouble to hide that Gervaise made herself his hand-maid.

But on this occasion it was he who waited upon her. One of the girls turned as Gervaise entered.

"Here she comes! Gervaise, where have you been? Freddy, don't be so abominably lazy—get up and get her some tea——"

Freddy Lampeter rose. He brought her the tea. He was taller than she, who was herself tall, and he stood bending a little over her, smiling the fixed smile of the scar. When he spoke his lips hardly moved. This, too, seemed to give whatever he said its own privacy.

"Why didn't you come down?" he said in her ear. She merely made a gesture—she didn't know——

"Haven't you been out?" he asked.

"No."

"I'd have stayed behind if I'd known," he remarked.

These were the things she hated him to say. How did he know that she would have liked him to stay behind? And if he did know it, was it not a thing he would have done better to keep to himself?

"Where did you go?" she asked coldly.

"Don't ask me. Pamela took charge. Look at her—she hasn't finished yet——"

And indeed Pamela's laughter was of the inordinate kind that sometimes seizes the young in church. She called across to Freddy.

“ Isn’t it *anybody’s* birthday ? ” she implored. “ Oh, I do so want it to be a birthday ! *Do* have been born to-day, Freddy ! ”

Freddy Lampeter sent her a smile, but did not move from Gervaise’s side.

“ Let her alone, she’ll run down,” he remarked to Gervaise, and again it was as if he and she were apart, commenting on the spectacle of the overstrained girl.

Then suddenly he addressed her on her own account.

“ What were you doing in the picture-gallery ? ” he asked her.

Her reply was as briefly informative as she could make it.

“ I’m going to sell the Lady Jane.”

He expostulated softly. “ Oh ! Must you ? ”

“ It isn’t a question of ‘ must.’ I needn’t if it comes to that ? ”

“ Then why sell her ? ”

Were her private reasons any of his business ? She had turned to the verandah, but he moved with her. After them floated Pamela’s voice : “ Oh, do let’s all dress up to-night ! ” Gervaise and Freddy Lampeter stood outside, at the top of the flagged steps that descended to the lawn.

“ Is she by one of the big men ? ” he broke silence after a minute.

“ Who ? ” she asked, as if she had forgotten what they had been talking about.

“ The Lady Jane.”

“ No.”

“ Then——” Apparently he would not let it alone. He meant why, in need such as hers, and with a Sir Joshua still in the house, sell “ Artists Unknown ” for a negligible sum ?

“ You know we are selling pictures,” she said as they moved together a little way along the lawn.

“ Raeburns—yes,” was his half-heard reply.

Then suddenly he employed the gift that disturbed her most of all. He walked by her side in complete silence.

Of their encounters it was these unprepared-for ones that always troubled her the most. Give her but a little time in which to take hold of herself, and she could always contrive to strip him of some of his wonderfulness. Nay, with a little preparation, she could dissect him, reduce him to quite ordinary components. That voice of his, she could steel herself against its pitch and quality ; such-and-such things he said in it—she could sift his meanings through and through, run them through her fingers like sand. And it was always heartsease to her to analyse him in this way and to find nothing whatever at the bottom. . . . But that was only possible when she spent some hours with him. Away from him, all was to do again. Though she scattered him as Lady Harow might have scattered her jigsaw map of Iceland, he always reassembled, to trouble her as profoundly as ever at their next impromptu meeting.

Therefore, as with the oppression of the house itself, better face it and get it over. She cared little at these

times what thrusts she gave him ; it was even prudent to be a little rough. He wanted to know her real reason for selling the Lady Jane. She would not have told him even if she could. So she allowed her silence to match his.

An iron fence crossed the park, with a gate in a semi-circular opening that only allowed their passage one at a time. It closed with a clash behind them, and they climbed the hill among the grazing cattle. In silence they still mounted. From the unseen lower road came the light pattering of a quick-stepping horse in a rubber-tyred trap. An oak half as big as the world hid the Abbey from their view.

Then, as they rose higher and ever higher, the Abbey was seen again, a roof-view, with oblique peeps into its towers, and the valerian and the wallflowers marking the plan of its crumbling walls.

When at last he spoke he did so without lifting his amused eyes from the ground. He returned to the charge again.

“ I wonder why you want to sell the Lady Jane,” he repeated.

She felt that his finger-tips were on her nerves ; he was experimenting with her. She gave him the coldest of glances.

“ You seem to have that picture on your mind,” she said.

“ Oh, I don’t call mine a mind,” he laughed softly.

She knew that if she was to free herself from him now was the time. She faced him haughtily.

"Do you really suppose that I don't know perfectly well what you mean?" she asked him.

He looked quickly up. "What do I mean?" he asked with curiosity.

"You aren't wondering about the Lady Jane at all. You're wondering about me, and I'd much rather you didn't."

He knew that that was not true, but she now wanted to have him like her mother's puzzle, all scattered into little pieces. She wanted him handlable, without that tormenting glamour, powerless over her. She had come out with him for that very purpose.

But he merely acquiesced, with an appearance of gravity even.

"I do often wonder about you, Gervaise. You know that."

Thereupon she laughed. "Oh, yes, I know! I know quite well how often that is! You wonder about me when you happen to remember me!"

He made no sign of resentment. He seemed to be examining himself.

"Well, you may be right," he said at last. "And anyway, I'm not putting in for extra leave."

And that also she knew in him—the modestly picturesque attitude with which he could admit a fault. He meant that he would be off in October, perhaps to get another of those little puckers in the flesh from an Afghan bullet or a knife. He was reminding her how perilously he lived.

But if he hoped by this to get under her guard, again he failed.

"You're going on to the Chaytors, aren't you?" she abruptly challenged him.

"Yes. I promised Blanche. Why don't you come? She'd love to have you," was his reply.

"Has she said so?"

"Why," he said, suddenly stopping, "you haven't had a row, have you?"

For answer she laughed again. Blanche ask her! If Blanche had said that she wanted Gervaise in the house, Gervaise did not believe her. On that rounded hill, with the mountainous oaks behind them and the Abbey laid out in plan below, an invisible Blanche Chaytor stood between Freddy Lampeter and Gervaise Harow. Gervaise knew it by his very readiness with her name; much better to be ready than to wait to be accused! Once more she laughed. He was actually helping in his own dismembering now, by laying bare his processes. And oh, the immediate comfort she found in it! Already she had faced the obsession of him, was half-way through with it, and felt her approaching liberation. What (she wondered) must it be to be married to a man like that! To find no ease in him save in his imperfections, no love but when he was not there! Let Blanche have him! By and bye Blanche would know as much as Gervaise knew!

The blessedness, once more, to have laid the ghost of him!

Her lips relaxed into a sudden smile. In her moment

of triumph she could not help saying what she did say, gaily, her eyes almost thanking him for his share of it.

"All right, Freddy! It isn't as if I minded, you know! Friends as much as you like, but you know I have your measure!"

And he, as they descended again, said not another word.

V

Gervaise was blythe. She and Lady Harow were the first down from dressing, and she stood behind her mother's chair. Not one look, word or thought did she want of Freddy Lampeter now. Was not that quietude within her breast more to be desired than that storm-upon-a-storm they called love?

"What was darling Pamela laughing at this afternoon?" Lady Harow asked, her fingers delicately over the puzzle.

"How should I know, mother? I wasn't there."

"Of course not. How forgetful of me. How much did they say the honey weighed?"

"I haven't seen the honey, either," Gervaise answered. "How do I look to-night, mother?"

For Freddy Lampeter's express benefit she had made of her arms a gratuitous and dazzling insult. Now that she no longer feared him he should have something to look at! Bare to the pits, they issued from the low frock of sooty black, rousing like a trumpet-flourish. Let Blanche match them if she could! The ringlessness of her finger, too, was meant to mock him.

A smile played about her lips as she put out her hand to the map.

“Wait, mother,—this piece goes in here—then this—then all that patch will fit in——”

She pushed a little islet of wood to the mainland. She laughed a delighted laugh as she did so. It was almost as if, having dismembered Freddy, she could put him together again or not, just as she chose.

But the white arm was swiftly withdrawn again. Absentmindedly Lady Harow had touched it with her lips as it had reached over her shoulder to the puzzle. Gervaise’s smile vanished. She did not know why she had not wanted her mother to kiss her arm.

“Listen—I think I hear them,” she said in an altered voice.

It was Pamela and Evelyn, with Freddy Lampeter and another man at their heels.

They assembled in the hall about the aperatif-tray, eight or ten of them, gay to the eye as a battle of flowers, noisy as a nest of young birds. One of them was busy with a shaker, and Pamela’s lush, formless little mouth munched cocktail cherries. About her buttercup temples was a wreath of minute flowers, and she steadied herself against Freddy Lampeter’s shoulder as she eased the ribbon of a satin slipper. Gervaise had advanced, and had taken the small glass somebody proffered her. She drained it without a glance at Freddy. She stood near a high wainscot the top of which formed a ledge. Lesson number one for Freddy! Indifferently the arrogant arm reached up.

She placed the glass upon the ledge. Pamela could have walked under that upstretched limb without disturbing a hair of her yellow head.

It was long since Lady Harow had taken the head of the Abbey table. That was Gervaise's place, and on the previous evening Freddy Lampeter had sat at her right hand. But this night another guest, arrived hardly an hour before, sat in that seat. It happened that to Sir Walter more than an ordinary measure of consideration was due. Moreover, white-haired as he was, it amused Gervaise to think that he was at least a whole man, and not, like the younger man he had displaced, a thing of scattered bits, permitted for decency's sake to keep the appearance of wholeness. For it was part of her tyranny that nobody else should see how stripped Freddy was. Pamela, for example, her hair almost brushing Freddy's shoulder a few places down the table, knew nothing of it. It was quite enough that Freddy himself knew.

"But how dare you show your face here without Auntie, Uncle Watty!" Gervaise was saying to Sir Walter. He was not really an uncle. He was her godfather. But she never called him anything but "Uncle Watty."

The old man shook his head.

"Ah, my dear, we're both a little bit on in years for your sort of party," he replied. "I shall sit with your mother while you dance. Is it to be dancing?"

Pamela's high little bosom was thrust half-way across Freddy Lampeter as she interposed.

"Did Sir Walter say dancing? Oh, but we aren't going to dance! We're going to dress up and play hide-and-seek all over the house—we may, mayn't we, Lady Harow?"

"Of course, darling," Lady Harow gave vague and sweet permission. "Has Sir Walter been told about the honey that was found, Gervaise?"

They took coffee in the hall. The firelight (Lady Harow liked a fire even in July) gave the wainscot a richer patine and flushed the frocks of the girls like a flower-bed seen at sunset. And as they stood, Gervaise took occasion to give Freddy Lampeter lesson number two. The aperatif-glass still stood on the wainscot ledge where she had set it down. A tiptoe maid was reaching for it. And now she saw that Freddy was watching her. Once more she lifted that arm that a man might have run a mile to see. She handed the glass to the maid, who retired. The next moment he was at her side, and, for the first time since their walk that afternoon, speaking to her.

"Rather like the princess in the story, what?" the private voice was saying.

With her head back, she looked along her lashes at him.

"What story?"

"Oh, a very old one; don't you know it?"

"No. But it's nice to be called a princess," she remarked offhandedly.

The ironical little pit at the corner of his mouth seemed to deepen. His voice was the voice of the

Freddy Lampeter who might have lain among cushions all his life.

“It was their bridal-night, and the lamp in the chamber had to be put out. He was already in her arms. She couldn’t let him go, even for that moment. ‘Love, it would seem an age,’ she whispered to him; and——” Freddy’s eyes rested for a moment on the long white arm, and then seemed to make a track across the hall to the staircase at the further end of it, “——and so she stretched out her arm. And it stretched away from her, out and out, till it reached the lamp. It snuffed the wick. And then it was round him again. Didn’t you know it?”

Low as he had spoken, Pamela must have heard, for she gave a little shriek.

“Oh, Freddy, how *frrrrrrightful*! He married a ghost woman! Do let’s be ghosts to-night!”

But Gervaise had turned away.

Was it quite so well with her as she had thought?

VI

The table with the puzzle had been brought into the hall, and over it Sir Walter and Lady Harow talked. Sir Walter too had his gift, of a great simplicity of heart, so that even his learning sat as lightly on him as a garment. He had grown up with these owners of the Abbey. He had taken Gervaise, a puckered pink mite, from her mother’s arms. He had seen her, a little anemone of flesh, in her bath. There was nothing

he might not say to this family, so different a man would he have been had he said anything he should not have said.

"Gervaise is tired out," he was saying to Lady Harow.

"The darling child has so much to do!" Gervaise's mother answered serenely.

"Does she do everything?"

"Everything! So wonderfully!"

"Does she happen to be in love?"

"In love? Gervaise?" said Lady Harow mildly. "She's more like a man than a woman. She always was. And I'm sure she would never leave the Abbey."

"But she says you may have to?"

"That's when she looks on the black side. It passes off. A good blow and she's all right again."

Sir Walter mused. He understood Lady Harow, but he loved Gervaise. Where Gervaise went, there his love was as the air about her.

"I don't think she's in love——" Lady Harow's sentence tailed away.

"Will you lend her to me for a little while?"

"Oh, you'd never persuade her!"

Sir Walter, too, doubted it. He knew the vanity of that magnificence, the Abbey on its rounded hill, and Gervaise had grown to her task of being its sole prop.

"I might try," he said.

"I think I shall be visiting in Ayrshire this autumn," Lady Harow remarked; and she added, as another piece of the puzzle dropped into its place, "There!

The last one took me three weeks, but I really believe I shall finish this in a week ! ”

As she spoke Gervaise entered the hall.

VII

Ordinarily they played billiards or bridge after dinner, or danced ; but no distant click of balls nor strumming of the piano had accompanied Sir Walter's talk with Lady Harow. Indeed not a sound had been heard since, half an hour and more ago, the party had swept as if before a gale up the staircase that branched off to galleries to right and left. Pamela and another girl, waltzing together across the hall, had tried to waltz up the staircase also ; and “ Darling Pamela—always in such high spirits ! ” Lady Harow had smiled as the two girls had come down in a flower-like huddle half way up. Now Gervaise entered alone, crossing the hall on her way to her own sitting-room.

“ What are they doing now, darling ? ” her mother asked.

“ They want the doors unlocked. I'm going for my keys.”

“ But surely it will be very dark ! ” The lighting-system of the Abbey was ancient, the lamps half a day's work, and family and guests lighted themselves to their rooms with the candles that stood in a long row on the table under the newel-post.

“ The far side will have the moon,” Gervaise replied.

But before proceeding to get the keys she paused once more before the puzzle table. The map of Ice-

land was now a sizeable continent, and growing apace as the number of unused jigs diminished. As Gervaise looked her mouth became compressed, and there was a gloom of doubt in her eyes. Yet the lips were not still for all their compression, and neither were the fingers of the hand nearest Sir Walter. Next to him at dinner she had been gay. She was so no longer.

"I've been asking your mother if you could come away with me," Sir Walter said.

She made a brave effort to shake off the growing mood.

"Now? With the house full of people?" she laughed.

"Yes, if that were possible," he answered simply.

"But it isn't possible! And besides, why should I?"

"For a change, my dear," he replied.

She laughed again, but now after quite a different fashion. Change! What else was her life but change—change, yet at the same time foredoomed unalterableness, either or both? To change her scene would not change Gervaise; and what could stop the on-rushing changes of the Abbey itself? All this was in her breast; but aloud she merely said, "Is Uncle Watty just a little bit fond of me, mother, do you think?" and she moved away.

And on her return through the hall she did not stop, but brightly waved the cluster of keys and ran upstairs.

For the convenience of the servants, the occupied

bedrooms lay together. A single corridor turning a right-angle contained them all, first those of the girls, then those of the men, with Freddy Lampeter's at the corner. Only Gervaise's own room lay apart, down a different passage altogether.

She sought the guest-rooms. The first three into which she looked were lighted but empty. She only heard voices as she approached the turn of the corridor. Apparently they had all flocked to Pamela's room.

It was a theatrical glimpse that Gervaise saw as she pushed at the door, of girls stepping out of this, slipping that over their heads, shaking out their hair, trying on cavalier hats, sashing themselves with impromptu borrowings. One of them, catching sight of Gervaise's face, held up a shawl that glistened like a wall of Aladdin's cave.

"Come along and dress, Gervaise, we've kept this for you!" she cried.

But Gervaise shook her head. First there were the dozens of doors to unlock. She waved to the half-dressed girls and shut them in. No sound came from the men's quarters as she passed. Only under one door was a crack of light, and somewhere the odour of a Turkish cigarette. Gervaise set out on her journey.

She had provided herself with an electric torch, the beam of which flitted mysteriously over floorboards and skirtings. Certain doors she passed by; they were not essential to the escapade. But elsewhere the light of the torch rested for a moment on locks and fastenings, there was a jingling as she chose the key,

and she passed on, leaving the door open behind her. Door after door she opened. High up in the wall of one passage a sort of clerestory of glazing glimmered palely, but this was not yet the moon's quarter of the heavens. One door which she found open she closed again. It led to the servants' rooms. It occurred to her that it might be as well to warn the servants of the game about to be played.

Then, at a point where she could travel no farther in a straight line, but must turn sharply to the left, she opened the door of a corner chamber and saw the astounding moon.

She stopped short and drew a deep breath ; that rising moon compelled her. It seemed almost near at hand, within a bird-flight, hardly to be believed to be the same that in another hour or two would be riding small and high in the sky. It bulged over the hill, orange and enormous. Such was its solid rotundity that the perspective of its volcano-scape could be traced over its retreating round. It made a glow a quarter of the heavens wide about it, and its effulgence seemed to dye the earth, as the foot of the rainbow tints field and tree and hill. The apartment in which Gervaise stood was a mere plastered cell in the honeycomb of the house, never used ; but that hanging bullseye out in space pencilled with shadow every tiniest accident of its walls, and sent Gervaise's own shadow streaming across the floor and then doubling like a piece of dark folded paper a yard up the skirting.

And thereafter, as she passed along the moonlit wing, leaving door after door wide open behind her, sometimes two rooms, sometimes three, were as curiously patterned with light and dark as if the eye had peered down the shining barrel of a gun.

VIII

Already she would have given a good deal to have been excused her part of the harlequinade ; but what was the good of moping ? Pamela's way was the sensible way—to laugh till the tears came into the eyes, dress up, have a fling ! Here were the moon-flooded rooms, and the doors stood open. Romp through them, then, and let cares take care of themselves !

But one does not become a Pamela on quite such easy terms as that. One is perhaps less a Pamela than ever when one has to tell one's self these things. Gervaise, reaching the ballroom with the chandeliers and the mirrors in which she had gazed at herself that afternoon, knew that she could no more be Pamela than Pamela she. We are born ourselves, die ourselves, and are nothing but ourselves in the space between.

Honey of the richest, but locked up in the interior of a wall !

But at least one can always take one set of clothes off and put others on. For the matter of that, if this whim was her guests' choice, she herself must most conspicuously dress up and be one of them. Her round of the doors had taken some time. She was still far

from her own room. Their fantastic game of "Puss-in-the-corner" might already have begun. She had better hasten.

With the beam of the torch wavering like a will-o'-the-wisp about her feet she hurried in the direction of her own room.

She did not intend to wear the shawl they had kept for her, that looked like a wall of Aladdin's cave. She had had a gayer inspiration. At some time or other in the past, she had forgotten for what tableaux or amateur performance, she had made herself a gown, not (to be sure) very accurately the Lady Jane's of the picture in the little gallery, but near enough, the slightness of the occasion taken into account, to pass muster as a representation. She had long since forgotten all about this costume. She had no idea where it was, supposing her still to have it; and things lost in that rambling Abbey were best looked for by daylight. But she remembered it now. Pamela, little mayfly that she was of moist mouth, satiny textures and artless sprawls, got her effects after a fashion, but there was more of dateless beauty in one of Gervaise's Pheidian arms than in the whole of Pamela's putting-together. So—the Lady Jane be it.

And if Freddy Lampeter's inquisitiveness about the picture really *had* been an experimenting with Gervaise herself, and if she *should* happen to surprise him in moonlit chamber or dark corridor, that would be lesson number three for him.

Her luck stood by her. In an oaken room of cup-

boards, by the light of the electric torch, she put her hand upon the costume straight away. Then, seeking her own room, by fire and lamplight mingled, she looked in the glass, first at those arms of hers that issued from the sooty black, and then at the stuffed and quilted sleeves of the tableau-dress. And her thought must have pleased her, for she smiled. From what she knew of Freddy, arms that he did not see might well be more interesting to him than those displayed in their beauty before his eyes. She had taken care that he should see them from armpit to finger-tip once that evening. Let him make what he could of the Lady Jane and her padding now !

But as she still stood in the sooty black with the firelight warm on the ceiling and her image in the tilted glass sloping towards her as if to fall upon her, again she paused. Her arms ? What was that story about arms he had whispered so privately into her ear ? Who was this princess of his tale, who could not spare her lover from his warm place by her side, no, not for the mere moment it would have taken to put out a light ? What eternity in an instant was this he had hinted at ? What this urgency of passion, this ghost-woman's arm long enough to have gone nine times round him ? Had he meant her and himself ? And had he actually had the effrontery to tell her so ?

As if she had been dealt a blow, all at once she knew why she had paused at her mother's puzzle-table on her way through the hall. She knew why her compressed lips had quivered and her hands had not been still.

He was *not* dismembered. He was whole once more, with the old, easy, scoffing, familiar power over her. All was to begin anew. Once more she was to know those perturbed moments of meeting, the pain at her pent heart, the flushings, the exhausting resolve, his re-demolishing. The two or three hours in which she had been rid of him were over, and when next they met it would be she who would have to beware, not he.

Well, if it was so, so it was, and there was an end of it. That cramping bodice and those bolstered sleeves would serve as well as anything else for their next encounter. Off with the black, then, and on with them ! She was far too late already.

Twenty minutes later there issued from her room a living Lady Jane, with the hues of the coursing blood in her cheeks and the glint of life on her brows. In one hand she carried the morsel of a handkerchief, in the other the torch.

But with her hand on the closing door she paused. The glow of the firelight lay on the disorder of garments within. She was oddly conscious of parting from them, of going out into some strange world strangely attired. Her eyes rested lingeringly on those usual clothes. Should she close the door or leave it open ?

She took a couple of paces away.

But suddenly she turned again and re-entered the room. From the inside of the door she took the key and reinserted it on the outside. The sound of the closing door echoed along the corridor. She turned

the key, tucked it somewhere in her waist, and sought the others.

IX

All in the house was quiet ; but that was of the essence of the escapade—to steal noiselessly upon one another and suddenly to startle the air with a spoken name. Gervaise could imagine Pamela's shriek should she happen to be stolen upon and named after such a fashion. But the chances were that by this time they were all at the other side of the house. The passages along which Gervaise moved showed only an occasional lamp burning, and those clerestory windows dim grey in the wall. They would have to grope to find one another here. But away over there, with the moonlight flooding the chambers, it would be flashing indeed, strange, and a little heart-quickenning. To imagine yourself alone and yet to know that you might not be alone—to pause with an arrested gesture almost as if you feared your own presence—and then, perhaps, as children leap out of their ambushes, to see one of them, startingly attired, spring forward with outspread arms into that torrent of moonlight, calling aloud a name. . . that was the game they played that July night in that Abbey upon its rounded hill.

It had been arranged that no door found open was to be closed again ; and, by those she had unlocked half an hour ago, Gervaise set out over the same ground once more. But no gleam of electric torch accompanied her now. The torch was hidden in her

hand. She knew the Abbey's windings as well by night as by day, as well asleep as awake. Only once she thought she heard a rustle. With her fingers still closed over the torch she pressed the button. Her hand became a little pink fairy, hovering all by itself in the darkness. The rustle turned out to be nothing. She released the button, and the fairy vanished.

She reached the corner chamber from which she had first seen the moon, but already its aspect had changed. That bulging orange ball was now a mere round of brilliance with even its volcano-scape hardly discernible. It changed the colour of things, greened the tinsel of Gervaise's garments, turned the reds and browns of bodice and stuffed sleeves to black; and her face within the dormer-shaped structure of linen was lost to the bridge of her nose in shadow. And, forgetting all about the game, she thought again of the lovely place, so proudly awaiting its end. She supposed somebody would buy it, some preposterously rich person or some public body; but how little of it their money would buy! Hardly the mere stones of it, for the busy brains and the wilful hearts of her race were the very mortar in which they were set! Hardly a yard of its ground or an oak of its hill, for an older allegiance would remain in the air, the very winds whisper their loyalty to the exiled stock! Probably it would be turned into a hospital or a hydro. It didn't matter. Gervaise would not be there to see.

Musing, she had left the moonlit rooms behind her and was approaching the ballroom again. All was

still strangely quiet, and she stopped, wondering whether it would not be best to go back to the starting-point yet again.

But even as she stood irresolute, their nocturnal adventure took a swift stride forward. Recently—within a few minutes at most—somebody had passed that way smoking a Turkish cigarette.

Gervaise could have given no reason for knowing that that cigarette was Freddy Lampeter's. Other men in the house smoked Turkish cigarettes, not to mention the girls. She merely *knew* that this cigarette was Freddy's. She knew it all in a moment, just as certainly as she knew something else, namely, that Pamela was with him. Indeed the wonder was, not that she knew it, but that she had not known it sooner. Now that she came to think of it, he had hardly been parted from Pamela the whole afternoon. He had watched her in those fits of laughter at teatime; he had sat next to her at dinner; it had been his shoulder on which she had leaned to tie the ribbon of her slipper. How Freddy would be dressed Gervaise did not know. Probably he would have cast something casually over his evening clothes, a pierrot's voluminous garment, say, or the traditional Mephistopheles cloak and hood. Pamela, Gervaise remembered, was to have been a *paysanne* of sorts, with a short, striped petticoat over her bare legs and a gaudy scarf clipping her buttercup head and depending in streamers below.

None of them knew of the impulse that had led Gervaise herself to dress as the Lady Jane.

Ahead of her stretched the dim perspective of the ballroom; but between her and it lay two ante-chambers. It was in the doorway of the first and larger of these that Gervaise stood. The smaller one, that immediately preceding the ballroom, was only smaller by reason of a comparatively modern alteration. Somebody, Gervaise's father or grandfather probably, had had the idea of turning it into a buffet or service-room for occasions on which the ballroom was used, and, as the domestic offices lay immediately below, this had been no great task. The panelled wall had been moved some three or four feet forward, the floor behind it had been cut through and a wooden staircase had been fitted in. To this stairhead one of the panels, now a door, gave access. The apartment had no furniture except a heavy Jacobean table.

Well, if, in a game that depended on vigilance and stealth, Freddy Lampeter chose to leave a breast-high scent of Turkish tobacco behind him, that was his look-out. Keeping away from the middle line of the doors, Gervaise furtively advanced. She crossed the first of the two rooms, which was empty. Empty, too, was the smaller room, with the Jacobean table in it. But from the ballroom itself there came a subdued murmur, and Gervaise peeped cautiously round the upright of the door.

They stood midway down the room, under one of the glimmering chandeliers, and the sounds Gervaise had heard had been his half-vouchsafed tones, and something sudden and as suddenly checked from Pamela.

And Gervaise had guessed his dress rightly. He was wearing the garb you will find in any costumier's wardrobe though there be but a couple there. The close-fitting hood of a Mephistopheles enclosed his small head, and the long crimson cape draped the spare spread of his shoulders and fell to his heels.

But what Pamela wore could not be seen. She was completely enfolded in his cloak, strained to his breast. Her small mask was all that was visible of her. It resembled the petal of some other flower, windlodged in the heart of a dark poppy.

So he had not been able to refrain, even from poor weak-headed little Pamela !

It was like him, too, to have chosen his position skilfully, as it were with an eye for the surrounding country. From whichever end of the gallery they might be spied there was escape in the other direction. True they could be seen, but fourteen or fifteen yards away, and not a word of their murmuring would be distinguishable. Gervaise, as a matter of fact, saw them twice over—once directly, and once in one of the mirrors before which she herself had stood that afternoon. She saw his head bend closer over Pamela's.

But those who see in a mirror can also be seen in a mirror. Suddenly a clear shrill shriek seemed to find the very note of the chandelier overhead. With no more volition than if she had been asleep, Gervaise had moved away from the upright of the door, and now stood framed in the ballroom entrance—the Lady Jane

herself, stepped down from the picture-gallery wall, and as motionless as she.

But the shriek was quenched almost before the chandelier had ceased to ring. His arms within the cloak had made a swift gathering movement, and the folds of the poppy closed completely over the alien petal. He was looking straight at Gervaise. He feared nothing. But Pamela was not to be allowed to see.

Prompt and admirable as ever (Gervaise reflected bitterly)—trust him! Even with that foolish little heart beating against his own he could still act instantaneously! Ghosts of the Lady Jane for him? It took more than a woman in a tableau-costume to shake those nerves! He was smiling the fixed smile of the scar within the oval of the crimson casque. And Gervaise scornfully waited for him to speak, disclose himself, acknowledge that he was out of the game.

But he did no such thing. Not only was he smiling that immoveable smile; he was coming towards her, with Pamela, still unseen and unseeing, shepherded along blindfold in the cloak. He was within a few yards of her, nearer, coming on without a falter——

All at once terror took Gervaise. No ghost could have been more affrighting than that steady, silent, smiling oncoming. There was only one bolt-hole—the service-stairs——

The dim, empty vista of the rooms showed again through the doorway where the Lady Jane had stood.

She did not know how her fingers found the catch of the door-panel. She could not stop to pick up the torch that fell from her hand and rolled against the Jacobean table. She closed the door again behind her. She shivered at the dark stair-head, with only the partition of oak between herself and them.

What would he do next? Be sure he would do something! He, too, knew of that little recess in which she crouched. He had only to pick up the torch she had dropped, fling open the panel, blaze the light into her face——

She waited, unable to move.

Then from the other side of the panel came Pamela's scarcely-heard quaver.

"Oh! Oh! Take me where it's light!"

Gervaise did not hear his soft laugh, but she could guess at it.

"It was—it was one of them, wasn't it?" came Pamela's piteous voice again.

Then his quiet, undisturbed tones—— "What? Who?"

"When you covered my face up—in the glass——"

"I don't know what you mean. Whatever made you shriek like that?"

"Oh, oh——" Pamela sobbed.

Then, after an interval of time of which Gervaise took no account, and quietened by heaven knew what consolation, the sobbing grew gradually less and less.

Open the door, he ? He had found a more damnable way !

And suddenly there came from Pamela a sharp, " No, Freddy—no, no——"

The rest might just as well have been shouted.

" But you promised——"

" No, no—that was this afternoon——"

Gervaise heard his smothered, masterful laugh. " A bit late to change your mind now, isn't it ? "

The next thing that Gervaise knew was that she was leaning against the door at the bottom of the stairway, where the arch gave on the courtyard.

X

The pressure in her lungs gave her pain, as if she breathed only with the last cells of them. And as with her lungs, so with the rest of her. Emotions and sensations (but not yet thoughts) rushed upon her and mobbed her. Before one could be identified the next had swallowed it up.

What had happened ? Where was everybody ? Why (for the irrelevant things jostled with the relevant), why hadn't the servants locked this lower door ? Why was she dressed in those clothes ? Hadn't she been carrying a torch ? What had she done with the key of her sitting-room ?

" Oh, not all at once—one at a time, one at a time ! " she wanted to cry, but could not because of the painful breath.

Then with so deep an expiration was she rid of its excess that but for the support of the archway she must have fallen.

Ah! That was better!

By and bye it began to come back in images less disordered. It began with that trace of Turkish tobacco that she had known to be his. From that starting-point the rest fell into proper sequence. She saw them again under the crystal shower of the chandelier. She saw Pamela's weak upturned little mask. He had seemed to hold it as some conjuror or ventriloquist might have held a property-mask, he the wizard, she the puppet, to play her part in the little illusion and then back with Blanche and the others into the trick-box again. "What is the matter with darling Pam?" Lady Harow had asked that afternoon. Well might she ask! Ask *him* what was the matter with her! He had had all the afternoon in which to perfect himself in it, and should know!

And presto! Even as Gervaise had watched, with a pass of his clever fingers the mask had vanished, and the prestidigitateur had advanced, with mocking eyes steadily fixed on her own.

Yet why had she not stood her ground? Why had she stood, dumb and rooted there, when she might have sprung forward and claimed the forfeit?

Had she been the guilty one, he the innocent?

She seemed to hear Pamela's voice again—"No, no, Freddy, that was this afternoon"—and then his soft masterful laugh——

They were still up there, with her torch lying on the floor to show where she had passed——

Gervaise stumbled out of the arch, out into the open court. Wildly she looked about her. Across the court, under a moon-gilded chimney-stack, was the latticed window of her own ground-floor sitting-room. She must escape quickly. She must lock herself up, be alone with herself.

She ran into the house.

But one other thing she had forgotten. Her sitting-room door was locked, and the key that she drew from the stiff-busked waist of the tableau-dress was that of her bedroom door. As if in some way he had been to blame for this mischance, the thought of him swept over her again.

Oh, devilish, devilish! Yes, doubly devilish, for surely a devil ought not to disguise himself as a devil! As an angel of light if you like; one allows a devil that; but to disguise himself merely as what he was!

Devilish too would be the skill with which he would presently be setting himself right with Gervaise. She could almost hear the low privy words in advance, for her ear only, as if he and she understood and the others were a mere spectacle.

“Poor Pam! Jumpy little thing! Of course *I* saw in a moment who it was. Pity you couldn’t see yourself as you stood in the doorway there—really awfully effective—I confess you startled me for a second or so. But I had a feeling it might upset her. So I just covered her face up. I found that red rig of mine in

one of the cupboards. What I don't understand is *your* bolting like that ! ”

And again (oh, you couldn't say that Gervaise did not understand her Freddy !):

“ I suppose you dodged down those back-stairs ? I nearly opened the door, but thought perhaps better not. That would have scared her worse than ever. And I say, Gervaise—I don't think I'd say anything to her if I were you—she thinks it was all her fancy—best let well alone, don't you think ? ”

A soft “ *Oh !* ” broke from Gervaise as she struck at the air with one lace-cuffed fist.

In order to get to her bedroom she must cross the hall again. She found it empty, but lighted ; evidently her mother and Sir Walter had gone to bed. But the half-completed puzzle still stood where they had left it in its tray before the hearth, where the logs streamed up the chimney in amethyst flames. Gervaise stopped suddenly in her flight.

Whole again, was he, and lord over her once more ? Ah, no ! Not so ! She would see to that !

The lace-cuffed fist descended in the middle of the puzzle. The fretwork fountain leaped into the air and fell again in a hundred fragments. She plunged her hands among the wooden jigs, scattered them, crushed them together, drove them this way and that.

And now a double handful into the heart of the amethyst there !

See them spit and flame and crackle !

That was the place for devils !

For a moment she watched the yellow flare that lighted the farthest corners of the hall. Then, with a stifled cry she ran upstairs.

XI

"Gervaise! Gervaise!" they called to her as she sped past them. Their game was over, and they were trooping down the staircase again, a motley rabble of squires in beaver hats, men in Dutch trousers, Philip in something frilly and satiny and green, girls in silver bells and cockleshells, girls in velvet gowns.

"It was Gervaise, wasn't it?"

"Wherever can she have been all this time?"

"And what's become of Freddy and Pam?"

A bright-eyed girl put her finger to her lips and made her eyes brighter still. They laughed. Hilda was only seventeen, the youngest of the party.

"But what *was* Gervaise supposed to be?" somebody else interposed.

"I know! Don't you remember those tableaux, Philip, when she got herself up as one of the pictures?"

"Yes. The Lady Jane."

"Then she was going to frighten us, all on her own! Brrr! I shall creep into your bed, Evelyn!"

"Shall you, indeed!" said Evelyn with a toss, and there was another laugh.

They made merry, discussed their escapade, told who had found. Men in beavers, men in turbans and sashes, got themselves whiskey-and-soda. Then, "Bedtime—off you go," they ordered the girls, and

silver bells and cockleshells took their candles, waved good-nights, and moved off chattering upstairs. The men gathered about the table of glasses and syphons and cigarettes, helping themselves to nightcaps.

"Hallo, what's been happening here?" one of them suddenly asked.

It was what remained of Lady Harow's puzzle.

"Why, it's all over the place."

"Well, we may as well pick it up."

But in the hearth charred pieces were found, and more and more charred pieces.

"That seems to have gone west all right," a squire in a beaver hat remarked; and they turned to other matters.

"Whose idiotic idea was this rag, anyway?"

"Pamela's, wasn't it?"

"It would be."

"But did nobody see Gervaise?"

Nobody had.

"Well, mine's Bedfordshire. You fellows going to stay up all night?"

They finished their drinks and yawned.

"Do we turn out here, or are the servants still up?"

"Better leave a night-light in case."

"Pity about Lady Harow's jig."

"Well, 'night, everybody."

They sought their candles and filed up the stairs. Philip's green frilled ankles were the last to go. On the table under the newel-post the night-light burned. Except for that, the glow of the dying fire, and the little

gleams that came and went along the guests' wing, the Abbey on its rounded hill was in darkness.

XII

Gervaise had heard their calling as she had fled past them, but she was not their hostess now. They must make shift to put themselves to bed without help from her. Usually they flocked in a body into her room, perched themselves on the edge of her bed, brushed their hair, chattered, laughed, made free with her toilet things, and remained until she shooed them out. But to-night she could not have endured their prattle. She had long since begun to weary of it. She did not intend to go near her own room at all until they should have settled down for the night. She turned away in another direction, avoiding the corridors by which she had passed a few hours before.

It was immeasurably more than a question of Freddy Lampeter now, a thousand times more than the Abbey itself, with its crushing burden of maintenance and mortgages and debt. She had now to face the whole range of her own nature and its widest extremes, from her ecstasies if she had any, down to the last of her bodily hungers. And especially she must face that strange midway lack which, when all that she asked was to be allowed to give, kept her for ever inhibited and immured.

Only to be allowed to give, only to offer herself, like a box of alabaster, to be broken open and have her treasure spilt in sweetness! Was it too much to ask,

with the rest of the world intent upon nothing but getting? Why should she be mistress of so many gifts and not of the final gift of giving? Is there *no* escape from that draconian law that is written in the blood of every individual heart that beats, that what we are we are, and so we must remain till the end? Oh, we seem free as the winds that blow! From our cradles to our graves we move in the illusion of liberty. We establish ourselves upon our fellows, do as they do, think their thoughts, and become indistinguishable from them. And then, lo, of a sudden there comes to us an hour. The unsharable thing has found us out in the midst of the multitude. One voice only reaches us in our isolation, the voice of our forgotten, nay, of our unlearned selves. For an hour, face to face with the void, we lie upon a bed that is only an anticipation of the bed of death itself.

And so it was with Gervaise. She must find an outlet for her generosities, her charities, her passionate love, her mere physical cravings, or break down. She must brave the angel with the sword, and force her way out of the Eden that had become her Hell. If prayer would save her she must pray. If it would not, better to sin with humanity than to die of heart-hunger in their midst.

She stood in a narrow, plastered passage with dim lancet-windows on her right hand. It led by the northern circuit of the house to the muniment-room, whence, by another passage, the picture-gallery could be reached. And it may have been that already she

was on the threshold of one of those *nuits blanches* of hers, in which the ancient place itself played so fantastic a part. She knew where she was, but knew it as it were with an added sense. That old feeling of timeless familiarity with every winding of the house had begun to enwrap her. She knew that she had stood in that same passage before, not merely many times—the visitations were not to be counted in that way—but immemorially. This experience, whatever it was, was only a repeated former experience, the times between were inessential interruptions. She was seeking now what she had always sought, only with an added and immense urgency. It had nothing to do with the muniment-room—she wasn't selling anything, consulting any plan, verifying any title. It was not the picture-gallery—there was nothing there but scars on the dull red walls and a wintry old woman whose clothes she appeared to be wearing at that moment. What she sought she did not know—but *she was going to know in a moment*. She did not quite remember its magic name—but *that name was imminently in her ears*. And when the thing for which she was looking did come, it would be one of those always-known things, that the day kept under lock and key, but the night like a thief unpicked again. Why not? Was she one of the farm-animals, to be yoked to her diurnal task and given nothing but her portion of nightly straw at the end of it? This was her own hour, when she was released from responsibility. Whatever beckoned was implicitly to be followed. There was not a riddling

door in the whole of that dream-haunted Abbey but sooner or later would open upon its own reply. . . .

Suddenly and confidently, she put out her hand. She had a little thrill of joy as her fingers encountered what she had known they would encounter—a door in the plaster wall. She had no key for it, but out of some remembered knowledge of the day it seemed to communicate its own secret. She had only to put her fingers under a ledge, to lift and push gently with her shoulder, and open it would come. She pushed and lifted, and the door stood open.

The muniment-room. The slight increase of light told her that. It was a small octagonal room, with a roof-lantern that looked directly to the zenith; but the moon that peeped down on her was but a leaden moon now. Cobwebs, dust, dead leaves, the droppings and deposits of the years since the lantern had last been cleaned, besmirched its brightness. About her stood the dim array of chests, strapped and iron-bound like church-doors, nail-studded chests, chests of peeling leather, coffers of wood, boxes of japanned tin, piled up against the walls, scattered over the floor. Old calf bindings looked through wire lattices, and in corners maps and plans stood rolled up like stovepipes.

But these were all. There was no revelation. Whatever she sought was not in the muniment-room.

But as she stood under the lantern, spectral in the stiff linen head-dress, one lace-cuffed hand resting on the table, all at once a light tremor took her. It was as if for the first time some insecurity menaced her

suspended state. Her moving fingers had touched a piece of paper that lay like a dead moth on the dusty table. And in the same moment there broke in on her consciousness the distant memory of a voice, flat and jarring and without modulation. The piece of paper was one on which she had made notes the last time she had been there. The voice was the remembered voice of some estate-agent's young man or other, perhaps the one with the spots whom she had hoped they would not send again.

"Quaint—I won't deny as it's quaint——" that voice that set her teeth on edge seemed to be saying, *"—but a fancy property in a manner of speaking—not every buyer's money—now what about 'Or near offer?'——"*

Her agitation increased. Those people again! Even in the quiet night they must force themselves upon her, with their trade-cards and their orders-to-view and their notebooks and their pencils behind their ears!

She looked wildly about her, and suddenly, with a swift spring, was at the second door of the room.

It had a modern spring-lock, and, with her hand on the little milled knob, she opened the door just sufficiently widely to allow the slipping through of her body. Then, with a bang that resounded along the passage, she drew the door violently to again. She stood, panting and listening, almost as if she expected to hear an imprisoned young man beating upon the panels.

Those odious associations! *Those* unwanted presences!

Then, as the echoes of the slammed door died away and no further sound came, she gave a deep "Ah!"

But it had been touch-and-go, that!

XIII

To tell the truth it had been very much worse. That tranced solitude of hers had been threatened, if not actually invaded. And if one set of people could break in on her by mere force of memory like that, so could others. What others?

No need to look far! Almost anybody Gervaise could have named seemed to have this power over her. It was not for her, their hostess, to comment on these guests who slept under the Abbey roofs that July night. Pride forbade that she should whisper even to herself that they had outstayed their welcome. They might remain for months for all the sign that Gervaise would make. And she admitted that after all they were there at her mother's invitation.

But what was the good of talking to her mother? Her mother always made such haste to agree.

"I know, darling, I know! But it's *only* Philip and darling Pamela—it's ages since we've seen dear Philip, and Pamela will do her own room. You look tired, sweetheart—do run out and have a blow——"

No, no, they must not come near her! These unconscionable guests were not the people she had set out in the stillness of the night to find! She was

looking for those older, more deeply-known friends of hers, the loving, understanding people, the helpful ones, who knew without telling what was in her heart and could draw it out, all the stored sweetness of her life, like wild honey found in the heart of a wall. Any others were only the weary day all over again. What she must now have, and quickly, was just the boon of mere rest. She wanted a hand laid without passion on her hair, the kiss of peace on her lids, a quiet breast on which to forget. Rest from night-wandering for her tired body, rest for her bruised spirit! Any seat into which she could sink would do for the first; as for the second, can there, except in Hell, exist such a thing as an unappeasable need? No, no, no! If God is not mocked, neither does He mock. To seek *is* to find! To hunger *is* to be satisfied at the last!

Heavily she stumbled along the black passage, wearily she pushed at the door at the farther end of it. She stood at the top of the three shallow steps at the gallery's end. She descended them, and dragged her feet to the embrasure of the nearest of the diamond-paned windows. She had reached the breaking-point. She sank into the window-seat, while the Jane of the canvas looked down on her from the wall.

Time she supposed, would use her so too. A year or two longer of beauty, a year or two more after that, and nobody would remember as much of her as her name. That inanimate thing on the wall would immeasurably outlive her; her portrait had never been painted.

Foolish, ever to have thought she could sell that Artist Unknown! Love her or hate her, the tie between them was indissoluble. . . Gervaise envied her her starkness. At any rate trouble was over now for her. . . .

Across the grasscourt the wallflower and valerian lay velvety-black along the top of the Norman wall. At the wall's foot a single glowworm burned in the grass, like a broken-off crumb of the unseen moon. Somewhere in the July night a hunted thing began to scream in agony. The screaming persisted intermittently for a time, and then ceased. But Gervaise heard nothing of it. With the linen-dressed head fallen on one gallooned shoulder, she slept.

That is to say she must have slept; for how else could she awake? She supposed she must call it an awakening, yet never before had she awoke after so strange a fashion. The chamber was a warm clear dusk, and somehow differently placed with regard to herself. She saw all its altered angles, not from the floor-level, but from above. She saw the thick dust on the upper edge of the portrait of the Lady Jane and the fastenings that secured the picture to the wall. The sheeted couch and the mantelpiece with the box of kitchen matches upon it seemed some yards below her. She felt light, free, and suddenly laughing to herself with tenderness and happy tears.

No need to look further for her peace. Here, in this unlocated, so oddly uplifted place, she had found it.

Nevertheless her eyes did range further. Past the sheeted couch, past the matchbox on the mantelpiece, she saw a huddled and widely-staring figure in tableau-garments in the corner of the window-seat. If that figure on which she looked down breathed, its breathing would not have stirred a feather ; if an artery pulsed, then the pulse of the Lady Jane on the wall might equally have stirred. Gervaise knew that she had left that empty tenement of herself. She, the ecstatic one, was sublimated from that poor shell of thwarted desires. Unless she chose to re-enter it, that Gervaise in the mummer's dress was dead.

And why return ? Why fear to gaze at the last upon one's own elements, these made pure, the others cast aside ? There had been no pain. It had been the gentlest of subtractions, as if from some white beam a hue had been withdrawn, or as if some superimposition, imperfectly coinciding, made the double image. Gervaise yearned divinely over that untenanted body in the window-seat that also was Gervaise. She put out her arms to that her lifeless sister, showering down on her an unimaginable love.

“ Sleep, sleep, poor tired thing ! ” she silently cried. “ Sleep, for I have taken from you the honey that was in your breast ! I flow with it, it gushes from me out of the Seven Wounds with which my heart was pierced ! See, I put out my breast to you like the pelican ! Eat of me, feed on me, poor girl with the locked and hungry heart ! For I am your angel, who was kept from you

for a time and times and half-a-time, but bring you comfort now ! ”

So she rained it down, the thing that passes understanding, showers of gentleness and pity, gifts of honey and oil and wine, Samaritans of love.

But all at once she felt a pang. The body in the window had made a feeble movement. The gallery too seemed to have shifted again, so that she no longer saw the dust on the picture's top, nor the cracks of its varnish. She was sinking, being summoned back, re-entering. . . . A fleece that crossed the moon dimmed the clear obscurity of the chamber. The old hangings took on a sombrero red. New and recent gashes appeared on them. The figure in the window seat seemed to be looking for that other half of her, drawing gropingly nearer. . . .

Then came a moment rather than endure which death itself might have been preferred. Her heart gave a horrible bound, and she was back, on her feet, numbed and tingling, her hands fumbling about her sleeves, headdress, busk.

What had happened ?

Where had she been ?

She did not remember. Neither did she know what she was doing there in the picture-gallery at all. Her brows were knitted, as she tried to remember.

They had been playing some kind of a game, but that had been hours ago. And she had taken it into her head to dress as the Lady Jane. Again her hands went to her head, as if to make sure. Yes, it was so.

She looked up at the picture on the wall, and there rushed back on her the mood of the afternoon.

How she hated the woman, with her pitch-black unsheltered eyes and mocking bony look ! Never tell Gervaise that *she* had never had her fling in her day. Gervaise did not know where she had this knowledge from, but she would have taken her oath that all had not been denial in *that* handkerchief-dropping lady's story ! She had been Sir Everard's lady ; that had been her room with the antique black four-poster between the two gilt French chairs ; but—foolish Sir Everard, if he had not watched her comings and goings ! The Abbey was large, and it was not difficult to push at the wrong door ! (Look like that as much as you please, Jane, but don't tell these things to those whose descent is from your own body !). There had been somebody, somebody to ask her private and disturbing questions, and to choose delicately among her nerves until he had found the exquisite innermost one of all, and then to twang out its piercing note !

And probably he had not even pretended to be faithful to her, this lover who had exchanged glances with those pitchy eyes behind Sir Everard's back ! Gervaise knew these gallants ! Fear them in the field, but dread them exceedingly in the bower ! To look at them one would think they had lain among cushions all their life ! They went from house to house, from love to love——

Gervaise began to tremble violently.

Yes, from love to love—Blanche Chayter, a dozen others, even weak hysterical little Pamela——

Pamela, dressed as a *paysanne*, in wooden shoes and bare legs——

It all came back to Gervaise again——those two standing under the dim chandelier, he a bloody Mephistophelian red, like those gashes on the walls, her face seen for a moment against the poppy's heart and then swiftly covered up——

In vivid cinema-flashes it broke over her, shock on shock, sometimes in sequence, sometimes not——

His mocking story about the princess with the arm—Gervaise's own hands feverishly gathering up her mother's puzzle and casting it on the fire—his talk with her on the hill that afternoon——

"Friends as much as you like, Freddy, but I have your measure——" they were her own words——

She had *not* his measure—she never would have his measure—he had hers——

Friends! What friendship could there be with a man whom she despised when he was not there, but to whose lifted finger she fell again the moment he made his reappearance?

And what had all that rant been of quiet breasts to lean on, kisses that weren't kisses placed on eyes, cool guardian hands placed on hair such as Gervaise Harow's? Was *that* a woman's business? Even wretched little Pamela had known better than *that*! True, she had begun by refusing, as a woman may well do——

“ No, no, Freddy—that was this afternoon——”

Then his soft masterful laugh: “ *Isn’t it a bit too late now?——*”

She seemed to be at the head of the dark service-stairs again, listening to words beyond the panel that no doubt had been intended for her to hear——

Quiet breasts? . . . She laughed aloud. No, no! Breasts not *quite* so quiet! Hands a little *less* spiritual in their errands! Kisses an hour long, and not on the eyes either, but kisses that made shapeless the mouth, that satisfied, at least until the next one!——

Again her hands flew to her head, this time in a frenzy of energy.

Though she hated him she *would* love him! Loving him she would still hate him! But not for another hour would she go without!

In each of her fingers a devil sprang to life. There followed the linen head-gear to the floor a second garment, and a third. Her voice came in broken, suppressed, disordered interjections.

“ Arms? He shall see, he shall see! . . . No, mother, you’re not to kiss my arm. . . . That was this afternoon, was it Pamela? Too late now? Wait, Freddy! . . . And then perhaps I shan’t hate you quite so much, Jane. . . . ‘*And she stretched out her arm quite across the bedroom and the light was put out. . . .*’ My feet will be dusty. . . . And then you can go, Freddy. I shall have finished with you. I shan’t want ever to see you again. . . Now these——”

Off they came. She showed white as a peeled wand in the transparent darkness. Her rich hair made a wavy heraldic mantling where not a single piece of armour was. Then approaching the sofa, she passed the holland dust-sheet about her, while the Lady Jane watched ironically from the wall.

Past where the turned-down lamp stood in the angle of the guests' corridor there stole a barefooted sheet-wrapped figure that paused listening, now at one door, now at the next. At the door where the corridor turned it listened a little longer before putting its hand to the knob. All seemed to be still within. With infinite precaution she turned the knob. The door was not even locked. She slipped in and softly closed it again.

A man's suit-case lay on the stand at the bed's foot, a man's toilet-things strewed the table. But the morning moonlight that came in at the window showed no man's dressing-gown. It lay across an unpressed pillow and an empty bed.

She stood still for a moment before opening the door again and drawing it to behind her. She had not even the key of her own room ; that lay by a tumble of masquerade garments at the other side of the house, on the picture-gallery floor.

And why should she have taken his key from the lock and fastened his own door against him ? Would *that* have been any help ? What help—when from behind the door on the opposite side of the corridor there stole the scent of a freshly-lighted Turkish cigarette ?

THE DEAR DRYAD

III

THE DEAR DRYAD

I

It all began so long ago that even the girl's name is forgotten ; but you can still see her type as she moved up the steep oak-wood on that far-off April morning—dense milky skin, hair of raw Pictish red, and light and wary eyes under the whitey-gold glint of her brows. To-day, as then, that skin freckles lightly over the bridge of the nose, but scarcely takes the sunburn ; and, if a sleeve happens to come apart or a brooch to slip, no vein shows through that thick whiteness.

The brooch that fastened the girl's single woollen garment was of jet, and the garment's blue was neither quite that of the bluebells that dimmed the tangled glades, nor yet the springtime blue of the sky against which the oaks raised their crewelwork of colour. The wide sleeves fell almost to her knee, and the plaited hair that made red runnels down her growing breasts were tied at the tips with little laces of the same skin that covered her feet.

She was not aware that she had climbed up into the oak-wood that long-ago morning to worship. She did not know what worship was—or rather she did not

know what it was not to worship. These things were not her concern, but that of those Wisers and Elders of her tribe, who, because it was their business to attend to them, neither drove the burnt-wood share through the earth nor hunted nor fought with the bronze-headed hammers and axes. These Elders themselves seemed to the girl to resemble ancient oaks, mysterious, reverend, apart, white with frost and hoary with the hue of mistletoe. Their lore was rooted in the years as the trees had their deep footing in the hills. She herself, by comparison with them, was no more than a bird that nested for a brief space in their boughs, a passing winged thing, nearly as quickly gone as the arrowy young bracken that thrust up its pale green shoots at her feet.

And yet she was conscious that morning of a knowledge that those ancient ones had not. They knew nothing of those tender preparations within herself, those first makings-ready, of which her mother had warned her. These it was that had brought her up into the high oak-wood.

And not all the oaks, but her own special, dedicated oak, had called her, as already in her short life it had called her twice before.

Naturally she remembered nothing whatever of the first time it had called her. Her mother had undertaken that service for her, carrying her, a tiny bundle rolled up in a cloak. When the cloak had been put aside, the brain within the little red knob had comprehended nothing, the little fixed eyes (darker then)

had seen nothing, and the weakly-moving mite of a hand had continued to fumble for the nipple.

So, when she had been not more than a few days old, she had been passed with ceremony over the oak's bough, and had then been borne off in the cloak again.

But her second visit to the oak she remembered quite clearly. Once more her mother had accompanied her, helping her by the hand up the steep slopes, in and out among the undergrowth that had stood as high as herself. It had been explained to her that this second visit was a Confirmation of the former occasion, and that henceforward she was to know for herself her own oak from other oaks, as her oak would know her from all other maids, and be specially hers. A dozen other maids she knew also had oaks, specially theirs. The world was a place full of hostile and inimical things, particularly (her mother said) for maids, and it was well to have so powerful a friend as an oak for one's protector and refuge and home.

The girl had a feeling that her mother ought to have been with her this morning also, but she no longer knew where her mother was. That was by no means an unusual thing. People, mothers included, did mysteriously come and go, seemed to be here one day and then never seen again. The men who carried the bright-handled weapons often went out and did not come back again, and the cattle, too, came and went. She hardly wondered what had become of her mother. That was the way things were, so what was the good of asking questions?

She knew from tradition the observances her oak required of her. She must give something to the tree, and she must take something from the tree, and if one took and gave something very near and close to either, that too was an excellent thing. One was then (the Wisers and Elders said) part of the tree, as the tree was part of one's self. And, though one died or were carried off, to the tree one would always return.

So, a long time ago, with the sunlight coming and going on the Pictish hair as she climbed, she moved in search of her oak.

She found it in the middle of its own little glade, among thorn and dark holly and the foolish birch that nobody worshipped. It was young and slender, like herself, but, young as it was, already a slip of ivy had grown up since her last visit and had wound itself round its trunk. That must be seen to at once. Oaks must be served if they were to serve you in return.

She did not intend to offer the oak her first blood. Long ago as all this was, it was not so long ago as all that. In those older days still the tree had had to be gashed, and so that it might understand that a friend of flesh was there and not only an enemy of bronze or stone, certain words that the girl did not know had had to be spoken. Now, the gift of a shoestring or a garment or some small possession sufficed. Walking among the oaks you frequently saw these gifts hanging from the branches, and they were never removed or disturbed. Everything else in life might change—mothers be seen no more, the men go out with the

bright-handled weapons and never return, the cattle be driven off and the stockaded patch be possessed by strange folk—but the oaks and the offerings always remained.

The girl sat down under the tree and began to loosen the laces that tipped her plaits of hair. The glowing strands fell apart, and a toss of her head brought them all about her like a bush of burning sumach. Another toss flung the bush back again, showing the whole of the round white brow, and then her fingers began to seize wisp after wisp and to pluck them violently out. Her brow was drawn with pain and her mouth was awry, but presently she had garnered a small hank. One end of this she took between her teeth, and her fingers moved as she wove a plait. All this time she was unaware that a pair of bright eyes watched her from across the glade. They were the eyes of a dark young man clad in skins. With one hand he put aside the hazels in order to watch the girl, and in the other was the smooth stone he used as a club.

Then, her gift for the oak ready, came the oak's gift to her. She rose, and inserted her fingers round the stem of ivy that was trying to throttle the tree. The branches rustled and waked, a couple of birds flew away, but the stem parted, and the ivy-leaves came down in a glossy shower about her head and shoulders.

Sitting down again, she took a length of the ivy-stem and began to unravel it ; for the stem of ivy, as you know, is made up of a close-spiralled twisting of narrow ribbons. These made a loose heap about her, as the

shavings curl from the mouth of a carpenter's plane. These also she chose and plaited. Then, her garters made, she drew up her blue garment and fastened them about the swathings that crossed her legs.

Nothing had grown closer to the oak than the ivy, and nothing was received nearer to herself. The end of the garters secured, she drew down her dress again and rose. As she reached upwards with the braid of her own red hair in her hand, suddenly, magnificently, the wide sleeve of blue fell clear away from her arm. She reached, as it were, to the oak's strong shoulder that veinless milk-white bough of herself. She fastened to the tree that twist plucked living from her own head.

Then it was that the young man, who had advanced stealthily half-way across the glade, with a rush was upon her ; and at the same moment, from away across the valley at the wood's bottom, there floated a sudden light, uproar and clamour.

She uttered no scream. In that moment of rush and shock it came swiftly upon her what had happened. As that faint harsh clamour from below reached her ears she knew all at once what had become of her mother. An old recollection re-possessioned her, of women and children hurriedly rushed with the cattle into the stockade, of men hastily catching up those shiny-handled weapons, and then of a hideous tumult of running and shouting and blows. She seemed again to be fearfully peeping through a chink in the stockade, to see the men of her own tribe forced back, and then

a darkness as her mother, rushing to her, had caught her up in a garment. Then a rough scuffle and nothing more—nothing but that final glimpse, of the marauders pouring away over the shoulder of the hill again, driving the cattle before them, fire and smoke all about her, and, dimly through it all, the wild screaming creature flung over a man's shoulder, who had cried out for her babe in vain.

Yes, that (she realised now) was what had happened to her mother.

She could only pant in the young man's close embrace and look up into his sparkling eyes. Because he was causing her pain there was hatred in her look, and she bared her teeth for a moment as he raised his stone in menace. But the gleam died down as the stone did not descend. The wary eyes, pale as silver through her dishevelled mane of red, continued to move from his fierce eyes to the stone and back again.

But not for a moment did she upbraid her oak that it had betrayed her. How should she be betrayed, when this was the way things were? Had they not always been so? Had not her own sire borne off her mother in exactly the same way, and kept her until a stronger had taken her away from him? True, there had been a difference. The girl knew there was a difference, though she could not have explained what it was. Her father had taken his *lodas goch*, his red woman, to be his comfort, to share his meat by day and his litter by night. He had fished and hunted and built for her, and had never beaten her except when

she had displeased him. But not so his conqueror. He had carried away a mere toiling-thing, a weaver of the blue cloth, a follower of the wood-yoked oxen, a tender of the little corn-patch. But the girl supposed that that, too, was the way of things. No doubt in time to come it would be her own lot too. It was no good asking of her oak more than her oak could give. Should not oaks, that lived so long in the world, know the way of the world?

So, perhaps, things were not so very much amiss after all—unless this young man should raise the stone again——

She gazed at the stone where it lay in his hand.

A stone! Had he no better weapon than a stone?

He had twisted one hand through the glowing hair and had turned her head down the wood. She turned once to look again at her oak, and his glance followed hers. He saw her offering tied to the bough, and his eyes approved. It was right that she should pay her service in her season. It was a good *lodas goch*, of a whiteness that he liked, and strong and excellently grown. Also within that blue sleeve was the long arm with the hint of russet beneath it to put round him by and bye. A very good *lodas goch* indeed, and very well met.

So he drove her down the wood, and at the bottom of it they came to a gap. From the gap she saw it to be as she had already known it would be—fire and smoke from the stockade and the women and cattle being driven away over the shoulder of the hill. Here

and there a small skin-clad figure lay stretched out motionless on the hillside, but she knew that no weapons remained with them. Weapons were great riches, greater even than the red cattle and the red women, since with weapons a man could be sure of all the rest. Again she glanced covertly at the stone in the young man's hand. For his own sake and for hers he ought to have a better weapon than that! Other maids might jeer at her, that her man should be armed only with a stone! She knew where an axe was hidden away in a secret place. All would depend on how he used her——

And, provided he did not menace her with the stone again—provided he fed and guarded her properly and pleased her in other ways—well, she might by and bye show him where the axe was.

II

The important thing about the oak was that thenceforward it possessed something it had not possessed before. Not the twist of red Pictish hair—thread by thread the birds stole that to weave into their nests. Not relief from the strangling ivy—that grew bushy and thick again as the oak put on the years that packed its heart-wood ever closer. But something else, some dedication, some bespeaking, some far-off echo of worship, lingered thereafter hauntingly about its boughs. It waited, grew great, yet kept as it were a secret as if it attended some sign peculiarly its own. Away over on the hillside there rose, not a rude

stockade, but a great castle of staring new stone, with grim machicolations and a drawbridge and a ponderous portcullis. Steel-capped men-at-arms, men with bows and pikes, tramped where the men with the polished axes had fought, and the clink of the armourer's hammers was for ever sounding within its courtyards.

For men still fought for their possessions, and made war for the possessions of others.

Only, if they would possess a lady, they now went about the business after a different fashion, as you may read.

Up that part of the hillside where the oaks had been felled to provide beams for the castle, there moved on an early morning a tall youth of seventeen. He was of a gay and open countenance and an exercised carriage, and the things that youth sees still lingered in his musing blue eyes. His hands were large and brown and strong, and the throat that carried his small head was supple as a limb. His jacket and hose were of grass-green silk ; at his girdle he wore a pouch and anlace, and in his hand he carried a paper with writing upon it. He glanced at this paper from time to time as he walked. But at any movement from unseen bird or beast he readily forgot the paper.

He had slept little that night, because of thinking upon horses and armour and courtesy and love ; but who or what it was he was in love with he would have been hard put to it to tell you. True, he would have answered promptly enough that all his love was for the lady whose glove had lain all night under his pillow.

And perhaps after all, "love" is not the word. What is the word when a youth lies so, enriching the soft curtain of the darkness with his fancies as the ladies of the castle wrought their tapestries, with scenes of jousts and huntings and fabulous beasts and magical flowers? What is the enchanted word, when the glove under the pillow is not so much one lady's glove as all the gloves of all the ladies in the world? And what is it when you write your verse to the Spirit of Beauty itself, but think you mean La Beale Alys?

La Beale Alys, who was not quite old enough to be this young squire's mother, knew only too well what that wonderful word was. It was the word "Seventeen."

(For it was but natural that his first lady should be a mature lady, the wife of a grown and proved knight, a merry, half-mothering lady, and his own mother's friend.)

There was promise of a hot day, but the sun was still far from its height. Dazzlingly it flashed along the dewy glades, glittered on leaves as if the whole wood had been set with lark-traps. The spell of his verse-making was still upon the stripling, and his lids were a little lowered against the brightness.

Perhaps that was why he remained unaware that La Beale Alys also was abroad, watching him, but taking care to keep within the edge of the clearing lower down the hill.

She was a fresh and comely and bouncing lady, but red and black, red as a rose and black as a raven's

wing. There was still time and to spare before one need ask whether she would have been less comely had she been less carefully attired. A mesh of gold twist, with a red stone at each knot, confined her ebon hair. Black, too, were her brows, with a gold fillet uniting the twin cauls across them. Numerous tiny golden buttons fastened her tight sleeves of russet velvet from knuckle to elbow, and her full robe was gathered up out of the drench of dew, showing little red stones on her slender feet also. She lurked out of sight of the green-clad figure ahead, as if after all she had a mind to turn back.

The straight green back disappeared, and she quickened her steps, making a *détour*.

The verses in the youth's hand were those he had made during the night, repeating them over and over again, and then rising to write them down by the light of the paling dawn. As he walked he sang them softly to himself, fitting notes to the words as the harper at the castle had taught him. He would have vowed they were about *La Beale Alys* and about nobody and nothing else. Here, jargon of armour and all, and altered only a little, is the rhyme he had made :—

“ What need you other harness than your own
 When cap-à-pie your Beauty is your gear ?
Your whiteness self is all your habergeon,
 Your helm the basnet of your sable hair,
 Vambrace your snowy arm, bosom your *mam'lière* !

“ So do I feign you built in Steadfastness,
 Castled in Truth and in all Virtue towered,
That lo, I keep for very joyfulness
 Ardent my vigil, as by you empowered
 To guard that gentle gear while as you lie embowered !

“It cannot be but on some time ago,
Whiles I ne saw no face, a faery arm
Rose in a woodland or a fountain lone,
Bearing a chrism-white brand whereof the charm,
‘Use me for ladies all, but keep her most from harm,’

“Her and our Very Lord, whose blessed Grail
Joseph in duty brought——”

Suddenly his song died on his lips. Beyond the wide-spreading oak under which he stood, he saw La Beale Alys herself approaching.

The eyes under the dark brows were modestly downcast, yet it could hardly be that she had not heard his song. He wondered that she should appear not to have done so, as also that she should be thus early abroad and unattended. He could not guess that she had slept no more than he. Had he guessed it he would have concluded that she was restless because Sir Sandys, her husband, was away.

Then she raised her dark-fringed eyes, and he advanced and bade her good-morrow, bending diligently over the dimpled knuckles that issued from the gold-buttoned sleeve. He asked her whether her rest had been good. In her reply she gave him a name that was not his, but one of the hundred names her fancy had for him.

“Neither good nor ill, since I have not rested, Pleindamour,” she answered. And with suddenly averted face, she added, “But you know not the meaning of that.”

He protested. Was he not, by her husband’s leave, body and soul at her command?

"Nay, madam, but I do. It were untrue to say that I have not closed my eyes, but slept I have not."

"No? Then of what were the thoughts that kept you awake?" she asked him.

"Of you, as ever," was his prompt reply, and he went straight on to inquire when her husband, Sir Sandys, was due to return.

"Sir Sandys!" she replied, with a dropping of her lids again.

For La Beale Alys was a little out of suits with the grave and pre-occupied knight who was her husband. A proper enough knight of his body he was, and of a good head withal, since in his charge were all the engines for the defence of the castle; and as for the good man's worship of herself, she had little fault to find with that either, except that he worshipped somewhat frequently at a distance, when he went forth to buy his pitch and hides and oil and other provender. When he did return, he was for ever exercising his men-at-arms at their stations, or overhauling his catapults and fenders, or giving directions to his builders for the repair of this or that, or poking his nose into masses of clammy mortar, or melting something perchance, or greasing something else, or poring over plans that the artificers had thumbled, or—but La Beale Alys could have talked a whole summer's day about Sir Sandys and his occupations and then not have finished. The good knight had been like that these seven years.

"What song was that you were singing even now?"

she suddenly asked him, thus informing him that she had heard his song.

He turned his head quickly as something rustled in a thicket. Then, turning his eyes back to her, he told her that it was a song he had made in her honour.

“ Mine ? ” She gave a little laugh, and her hands made a slight movement towards the jet-black hair in its gold tiring. “ What ails your eyes that you should see me thus, Pleindamour ? Already I am old ! ”

He vowed (but his glance was on the thicket again) that nothing ailed his eyes—not one of his hawks saw more keenly than did this same love of his. Her answer was to tease herself and him.

“ But this brow is lined ! This hair, what know you of the grey that is hidden in it ? A steel cap, pardie !——”

It was only a squirrel in the thicket after all. . . . As he turned to her again he would not have it either that brow was wrinkled or her hair grey. Neither in truth were they, for all it pleased her to say so, and this time her look at him went farther than her words.

“ My whiteness my harness ! And what know *you* of my whiteness ? It is tidings to me that I am safest in my smock ! By my reasoning a heavier habergeon were not amiss ! And I like not much this bricklayer’s work of Steadfastness. That is a trowelful of Sir Sandys’ mortar indeed ! We shall be greasing the portcullis chains anon ! Castled ! Towered ! Come, let us have this fortification again, since it is thus you see me——”

She was merry enough, this early-rising lady who counted her grey hairs before they came ; but it was a little in despite both of herself and him. She intended no harm (more than a very little), yet she could not leave it alone. It was much on her mind that men, and not women, had invented this stuff of the stone-yard and the armourer's shop that they made their verses of. For herself, she accounted a little mirth in due season as more to the purpose. The day would come when this damoiseau would so account it too. He, too, would learn that ladies were made of quite other material. At present he knew as much about them as he knew about unicorns, and it was in order that he might know a little more that she sent him so constantly on bootless errands, and watched his face when she called him Pleindamour or some other soft name, and secretly thought his verses naught but his running and leaping and catching of horses a great deal.

And it was in order that he might know anything else he wished that she had dropped her glove one day as she had gone into her bower, and had been careful not to look back.

"Many an one in your place——" she began in a low, tremulous voice.

"Madam?" he asked.

"——would sing again," she ended unexpectedly, on a laugh that he did not understand.

He did not understand, and neither did he know how already she was busying herself as he began his

song over again. Her lips were pursed. . . . Her whiteness her gear? He had written truer than he knew! He must needs take the habergeon on trust, yet she could give him some guerdon of it——

With her hands hidden in the ivy that mantled the oak, she was busily stripping away the score of little buttons that fastened the tight-fitting velvet sleeve.

“ It cannot be but on some time ago,
Whiles I ne saw no face, a faery arm
Rose in a woodland or a fountain lone
Bearing a chrism-white brand, whereof the charm,
‘ Use me for ladies all, but keep her most from harm.’ ”

Suddenly his song ceased under her darkling gaze. He wondered whether she was ailing that she should look so. Her voice was smothered, passionate.

“ Yes, I have whiteness for a season or two longer—then all will be too white! And a song about my whiteness contents you! You make a song for my ears when I go hungry! You speak of brassarts and vambraces——” she broke out. “ Would you know how white? And how white the rest? Look—be you and this oak my witness ! ”

And somewhat to his surprise, for indeed he thought her ailing, she stripped away the velvet sleeve, showing an arm still as young as any.

You meant mischief, La Beale Alys. You planned this last night in your chamber as you tossed—nay, weeks ago, when you dropped that glove. But you waste your trouble when you call that oak to witness.

That is no dark lady's oak, has no help for such as wear raven's-feathers for brows. You never gave it a single hair of your head, nor accepted from it a garter to bind your knee. No vows passed between you and it ; that did not change when your race supplanted the red. Therefore seek another oak, La Beale Alys. Every rustling branch of this one, every tingling root, was married to another ages before you were born.

Nor shall it avail you that he praises your arm, as in duty bound, nor that he kisses its finger-tips, so that for a moment his hair lies warm upon it. You are in different woods, you and he. Your wood is the everyday wood you see from the castle-walls, the wood that provides timber for joists and food for swine ; but his is Broceliaunde. You may see it now if you care to look into his wide and wondering eyes——

For a light breeze stirs in the oak, and he listens and slowly smiles, as if returning some soft and musical echo of laughter within its boughs. Already you are fastening up those little golden buttons again, but he gazes at the place where your arm lately was, as if its image were still there. Across the glade something moves in the bushes ; there is a soft scampering across the clearing. . . .

All that your eyes are aware of is a hart, startled to find that it is not alone in the wood. . . .

And the oak sees to it that even your verses (if ever they were yours) are taken from you ; for suddenly the young man stoops and picks up a twig. With his an-lace he shapes and points it.

Then, notching the oak's rough bark, in the place where once a twist of red-gold hair hung, he pins his paper to the bough.

III

After that the oak grew to be so old that, merely because it had lived so long, nobody would have thought of cutting it down. Instead, with wooden props, they shored up two of its arms, so that it resembled Moses when he would see the battle to the end. And still that something, that early thing, that was neither a wisp of hair nor the verses of a dreaming boy, persisted mysteriously about it. On the hillside there now stood a gabled house, built of the stones of the old castle. Of the castle itself only a few butts of old masonry remained, with grasses seeded in the chinks and wild flowers in the crannies.

Then one day, not very long ago, the oak fell. A December tempest brought it down, and it lay there among the broken upstart saplings, epic in its ruin, hollow as an old skull, grey with lichen and the wintry rime, bearded like a Druid with the pale mistletoe, its ancient arms tossed up in agony to the skies.

On the morning of a Christmas Eve a young man and a young woman stood together beside the dying tree. They had come up into the wood to gather holly and mistletoe for the decoration of the gabled house—that is to say, the young woman had come for that purpose. The young man was there because she was there, and he rather thought that had she come on the

morning of Christmas Eve for mushrooms or plover's-eggs he would have been there just the same.

But whether or not he wanted to marry the girl he could not for the life of him have told.

Her name was Bronwen, which, in the country that had cradled her and her forbears, means "white breast"; and the hair that showed under her knitted cap of white wool was a splendour of raw red gold. A few strands of it stirred about the white muffler she had carelessly cast about her throat, and the brows above her pale eyes were of whitey-gold. She wore a jazz blouse of little red and white flames with freakings of black in between, and the boots under her short tweed skirt were laced high, and were the same boots in which she; had driven a three-ton W.D. Berna lorry.

And she would have married him any hour of the day he had asked her.

If one could judge by his few mumbled words, the young man appeared to be wondering how the fallen tree was to be disposed of. But his eyes were as often on the girl as on the tree. They were quiet, rather anxious grey eyes, as if he really did not know what to do for the best. He wore an old tweed shooting-jacket, so old that it had had to be reinforced with leather at the wrists; but his breeches and puttees and the collar at his neck were of khaki, and he tapped his thick-rubber-clumped boots with his cane from time to time.

"Wouldn't be easy to get at it with a crosscut," he muttered. "And it's hardly worth burning, anyway. Drill it and stick a primer or two in——"

The girl scarcely heard him, for her thoughts were quite otherwhere. She had known the oak all her life. It had been her mother's favourite sitting-place, and, when it had grown insecure, it had been at her mother's request that the props had been placed under its failing limbs. Bronwen remembered her mother quite well ; she even remembered rolling, as a mere baby, on the shabby old manoeuvre-rug that had been spread under the oak. Later, when she had begun to read her fairy-books, she had crept into the tree's cavernous hollow, and had pretended to herself that she lived there and was a dryad. She had always felt that she had some special understanding of what a dryad was. Where she had this conviction from she could not have told.

And now the tree was as good as dead. Too bad that trees had to die like that ! Why, they said it was more than a thousand years old ! A thousand years ! All sorts of dead-and-gone people must have sat under it, and met their best boys there, and quarrelled and kissed and had the time of their lives under its poor old boughs ! Really she couldn't help feeling a bit mopey about it. It had been such a pal of an oak. And now it had gone west.

As the driver of a three-ton lorry she would have kept her mouth shut about the oak. As the owner of that hair and of the ancient name that meant " white breast " she still held her tongue about it. But for all that she had a feeling that she was losing part of herself.

" Anyway your father won't let it lie here," the young

man's voice came as if from a distance. "Breeds more pests than all the others put together——"

Because his talk of pests and crosscuts and primers jarred on her a little, abruptly she bestirred herself.

"Well, let's do something. The car'll be round to take us to the Proberts' at three, and half the decorations ought to be up by then. You've got the thickest gloves. Will you get the holly if I'll get the mistletoe?"

She cast aside her throat-wrap, scrambled up on to the giant trunk, and began to make her way towards one hoary limb.

The young man watched her. He was still unable to decide what was the best course for her, the best course for him. Girls were the devil of a problem nowadays. Sometimes they scared him half out of his wits with their new crude logic, or what they called their logic. He didn't know that he called it logic at all. Much of it sounded to him like a pert and unfounded *tu quoque*, as if a man's meat were never by any chance a woman's poison. But it came to much the same thing in the end whatever you called it, and he wasn't sure it was good enough to risk marriage on. Not that Bronnie was one of the worst specimens, of course; there were times when he found her quite reasonable. He didn't suppose she would take it as a sex-challenge if he ventured to ask her whether she would mind being married in a church. She might not object to the word "obey" or to a wedding-ring. But for all that she sometimes had extraordinarily

decided views on things. Picked 'em up in the Waacs, he expected. He hadn't wanted her to go into the Waacs. He would have preferred to keep women and war entirely apart. It might have helped the country, but he couldn't see that it had done the girls themselves much good. It had unsettled them, put half-baked ideas into their heads, till they knew what they didn't want, but hadn't much idea of what they did want. And he liked to look up to his women-folk—you know—to keep them a bit apart. What did they want anyway—to be dragged away by the hair, or knocked over the head with a stone?

But he shook off his thoughts. Whatever else she was she made a perfectly topping picture as she stood up there, hanging on to the oak.

Well might he admire. She stood in a forked crutch some seven or eight feet from the ground, and the wintry sun made of the dark ivy and the rimy boughs, the jazz-bloused girl and the myriad intricate shadows of limb on limb, a miraculous dapple of pale colour. By Jove, if he could only have been an artist and painted that! But no artist could have got that burning gold of her hair against the thick creamy white of her nape. Whether he ever married her or not, he would always see her like that—all in the picture, so to speak, perched up in the oak as if she was part of it, for all the world as if she lived there. That was something to have seen anyway. . . .

And, having seen it, he turned away in search of holly.

But he had not taken a dozen steps before he heard the sound of a breaking branch, and a thud and a short stifled cry. In an instant he was at her side again.

“What’s the matter, Bronnie?. . . . Oh, Lord! Are you hurt?”

His eyes went upwards to the branch from which she had slipped. She hardly seemed to know whether she was hurt or not, she trembled so, and he was unaware that for the moment he had her almost in his arms. His hand, supporting her, encountered something cool and soft and firm.

It was her arm, naked from finger nails to shoulder.

On the arm itself there was not a scratch, but the whole of the jazz sleeve fluttered from the bough overhead, ripped clean out from the shoulder as she had sought to save herself.

And suddenly he knew what to do now, as he held her a little way from him and drew a deep breath. He stared at the lovely white thing that clung to his shoulder. Bronwen, his *lodas goch*! He had never dreamed of such loveliness! There could hardly be another arm like it in the world, unless it were its fellow, to put round him! Doubts? Questions? Woman old and woman new? A man can but venture—it was always so——

The next moment she was at arm’s length no longer, but crushed, that lovely whiteness and all, against his breast.

“Bronnie!” he cried, laughing, and looked into her eyes.

What was the look he saw there? What made it seem so old, though seen by him for the first time? For she seemed both aware of his nearness and yet unutterably far away. Readiness and yielding were in those silvery eyes, but there was something else also. Was it fear lest, having got her, he should not always be able to keep her? Was it a still deeper need, a need of something more even than he could give, some nearer fellowship, worship, identity?

And why did her eyes go upwards so to the torn sleeve fluttering from the bough overhead?

The look only lasted for a moment. Then he was covering the arm with kisses, as much of it as he could reach without letting her go. And she was lifting eyes to him in which were now neither fear nor any other need, but only the readiness.

"If you like, Pearce," she said.

"But I say, you'll catch cold," he said by and bye.

"I'll get it down and you can fix it up with a pin."

But she answered rather quickly. "No, no—leave it there."

"But it's only the seam that's gone."

"No, no. Leave it. And I'll get just one sprig of mistletoe. We'll get the rest somewhere else."

She swathed the white arm in the less-white muffler, and placed in her bosom a bit of mistletoe she had brought down in her fall.

Naturally she had no idea the same thing had ever been done before.

THE REAL PEOPLE

IV THE REAL PEOPLE

I

JUST because Aubrey Kneller came to grief there, the little street shall not be given its real name. We will call it Pountney Place. It is in the London Postal District S.W. 1, and Harrods' and the Oratory are near its upper end. At the other end a glimpse of pale Belgravia stucco closes its short perspective of hardly more than a couple of hundred yards. No great volume of traffic passes along it; in fact it has that air some women have, whom one does not know, would just a little like to know, yet somehow never takes the trouble to be better acquainted with. Aubrey Kneller had never set foot in it until that May afternoon. Then he yielded to its lure and entered it, noting its shy Hogarth frontages, its bright but modest sunblinds, and the windows of its *couturières* and florists and antique dealers and makers of glossy and expensive boots.

Until that afternoon or thereabouts, Aubrey had not been the kind of man to spy out secrets, of streets or anything else. He had always kept, as one might say, to the Brompton Road of life, well content with

its plate-glass frontages and elaborated window-displays. He knew his business, which in a sense was plate-glass too—the writing of books that people wanted and were willing to pay for, and not of those they didn't want and would not have had given. He had the air of a fortunate and well-paid man—faultless suit of navy blue, gold-mounted stick and yellow gloves, and new light-grey Homburg hat. And it was his fate that he wandered into that coy little street instead of sticking to the Brompton Road.

He was vaguely conscious that for some months past he had not been altogether himself. The trouble, if trouble there was, seemed to be about his latest book, *Delia Vane*. There was no doubt that, in one way and another, it had led him the devil of a dance. Even now that it was finished, sealed, registered and handed over the Post Office counter hardly an hour before, he was somehow not rid of it. It still echoed. He half wished he had the manuscript back. A telephone-call to his publishers would bring it back. He couldn't make up his mind about it. It was a risk, in that it was a marked break-away from his former manner. In some way that he could not explain, the thing itself had taken charge, and Aubrey was very uneasy in his mind about it.

For, originally, *Delia Vane* was not to have been the title of his book at all. It was not even to have been about anybody called Delia Vane, nor to have had a character of that name in it. Merely, at an early stage of his work, he had felt the need of some non-

descript minor personage, the needy-governess kind, meek, self-effacing, the loving-but-not-loved sort and so forth, to be used as he wanted and shoved into the background again when he had finished with her. And note that it is necessary to speak of this purely imaginary character in Aubrey's book as if in some sort she had had a real and corporeal existence.

Precisely such a character, then, had stepped forward from wherever it is that these figments do come from, and had humbly applied, as it were, for the situation. And Aubrey, judging that she would suit very well, had hardly given her a second glance. Out of the ragbag of his mind he had tossed her a skimpy little frock, a pair of thread stockings and resoled shoes. Not for a moment had he dreamed that she would not be as good as gold.

But mark what had followed. One afternoon Aubrey had put aside his work, well content with it, happy to think that it was running on the same smooth lines as the eight or ten books that had preceded it. And he had taken it up again the next morning to find that this foundling, this poor relation, this waif who ought to have thought herself lucky to be in a book at all, had so far forgotten her station in life as to set her cap at his principal male character.

Naturally such a thing was not to be thought of for a moment. In that illimitable little world of a few inches wide that separates an author from the paper he writes on there had been something like a scene. Aubrey was a kindhearted man, reluctant to hurt the

feelings even of a puppet in a printed book, but this was rank insubordination, calling for firm action. Later he regretted that he had not been still firmer, even at the expense of some kindness. As it was, he had had her up on the magic carpet, next his blotting-pad, had pointed out her offence to her, and had left the rest to her proper feeling. A tear, as one might say, had trembled on her lashes—the length and curve of which, by the way, he had not hitherto noticed. She had hung her head in contrition. Then, the lecture over, she had vanished whence she had come. The creator must be master of his creatures.

But barely a week afterwards he had had to rap her over the knuckles once more. Again we must suppose that we are watching something that happened in that mysterious little realm that lies between an author and his desk. The following dialogue had, to all intents and purposes, taken place between Aubrey Kneller and this little starveling who ought to have been washing down somebody's front steps.

“ But it's so dull there ! ”

“ Dull where ? ”

“ Where we all are till you think of us.”

“ I can't help that. It's your proper place. Suppose I hadn't thought of you at all ? ”

“ I shouldn't have minded that so much. I hadn't been out then. I didn't know anything else.”

“ Well, I don't want to be hard on you, but you must do as you're told or else get somebody else to think of you,” Aubrey had informed her.

"If I'm not to have any fun why didn't you let me alone?" she had sulked.

"Now that's quite enough. Off you go. I'm busy."

And off she had trotted, with downhung but mutinous head. When next she had popped up the scene had been almost painful.

"But I want to!" she had flung at him.

"Well, you're not going to, and there's an end of it."

"Who says?"

"Annie——," this is solemn warning from Aubrey, "——now you be a good girl!"

"What's the good of being good if you don't get anything for it?"

"You must be good because it's the proper thing to be. Understand that Pat's far above you in station, and he's going to marry Rosamond. That's what my readers expect, and it's what they're going to have."

"Rosamond!" (One would have said *real* contempt, *real* disdain.) "She's only a showroom dummy! And you've given her every decent thing there is to wear in the book! That's all she is—clothes and a lot of words by you! You ask Pat!"

"Pat! Do you mean Sir Patrick Archdale?" Aubrey had demanded.

"Yes, if you're going to be pompous about it!"

"Now look here, Annie——"

"I don't think I like that name very much," she had remarked coolly. "I shall think of another one." And then, with sudden coaxing, for when all was said

it was in his power to forbid her the book altogether, " Please, Mr. Kneller ! Just a tiny little ! "

" I've told you no."

" Then——" here had come a gleam of temper swift as the flash of a blade, " —then I shall do just whatever I like and I shan't tell you anything about it ! So send me back, there ! I'd rather be there than in that mouldy crowd you've written ! "

You see the kind of thing that was running in Aubrey Kneller's mind as he strolled along Pountney Place, unaware that anything in particular was lying in wait for him.

II

His eyes rested on a little antique shop with a single Sheraton chair in the window, its price-ticket carefully hidden. Then they fell on a similar window, with nothing in it but a cabinet with a blue jar on the top. And again he was conscious of the prim, quakerish aspect of the whole street. Its shops, small and expensive, were really old Georgian houses, put to their present purpose with hardly any attempt at conversion at all. They had fanlights and rod-bellpulls and old knockers, domestic for all their double life. The Sheraton chair, although for sale, hardly ceased to be part of the furniture of the room within, and the cabinet with the blue jar had only turned its back on the interior for a moment, and would turn round again when it discovered that there was nobody in the street to look at but Aubrey Kneller.

And Aubrey was restless, and in two minds whether he would not telephone for that manuscript back after all.

For he lived in an expensive flat in King Street, St. James's, and was fond of such things as first editions, water-colours by Cox, and intaglios in exquisite little nests of trays. He liked his stall at first nights, the quietude of his club, and his luncheons *chez* Bellomo or Jules. And these things run into a certain amount of money. He wanted rather to increase his income than to check the source of it, and he could only increase it by diligent tillage of that Tom Tiddler's Ground, the few inches of space between him and his writing table in which everything in his books happened. If all went well there, money flowed. If anything went amiss it did not flow. In the event of things going very badly indeed, the news would quickly spread that he had lost touch and exhausted his freshness. There were twenty eager young rivals straining every nerve to take his place. Well-to-do as he was, he merely lived on his wits, and must take care to keep them bright and in good running order.

And now a chance-found little nobody whose insignificance appeared in her very name—Annie Thompson—had seriously interfered with his style.

For she had been as good as her word. She had begun to act precisely as she pleased, without consulting him at all. Meek, self-effacing and unloved, she? By no means! He had long since begun to go in dread of her. And at first, fearing that he had been

sticking at it too closely, he had tried a change of air. He had gone into the country for a few days, and had almost succeeded in putting her out of his mind, where she ought never to have been at all.

But God only knew what had happened during those few days' absence. How, indeed, could anything happen to his book, and him away? Yet there it was. Whether this upstart wanted Pat for his own sake, or to come between him and Rosamond, or merely to be evens with Aubrey Kneller, maker of all three of them, made not an atom of difference in the result. Simply, behind Aubrey's back, she had dug herself in past dislodging, and Rosamond, with a noble gesture, had stalked clean out of the book. Vain to ask where she had gone. Perhaps she had never really been there. Perhaps she had merely been something Aubrey had thought of a long time ago and had gone on copying ever since because people paid him to do so. It was not even in his power to call his heroine back. That would have been to knock his book on the head once for all. Annie Thompson reigned supreme; and for the unusual reason that she was the only real person it had ever entered his head to describe.

Perhaps you begin to see the grief to which Aubrey Kneller came that afternoon in Pountney Place.

The rest had followed very quickly.

"I've been thinking it over about my name," Annie Thompson announced one day, her voice thrilling through that mystical little world in which she ruled.

"I've chosen Delia. Delia Vane. You're to call me that. And of course when I marry Pat, I shall be Lady Archdale."

"Oh," was all that the unhappy Aubrey had been able to say.

"And you'd better make a note of the book's title too, Aubrey, my dear. That's to be *Delia Vane* too, after me."

And since she decreed it, so it had come to pass.

One more of these author-and-character colloquies and we can be getting on. The question of Miss Vane's clothes had arisen.

"But there are plenty of clothes in the book," the wretched Aubrey had demurred. "There are all Rosamond's."

"Rosamond's!" the answer had come back with a little explosion of laughter. "Do you mean those Jaegers? Do you think I'd be found dead in those? Now don't you bother about making me too pretty, Aubrey. I can do without the peaches-and-cream. But clothes I *must* have. You give me clothes and leave the rest to me. I've pinched one or two things as a matter of fact—on credit, sort-of—look——"

And with one finger she had fished up from her bosom about an inch of some black, cobwebby stuff or other—a black lace chemise.

"I won it," she had purred. "Do you like it?"

"I never gave Rosamond that!" the startled Aubrey had cried. "She'd have blushed to wear such a thing!"

"Course. I tell you I won it. Some blusher, Rosamond; she nearly blushed me out of my book—jam-angel!"

"But look here, Delia," Aubrey had miserably expostulated. "What about my public? Don't you see that's the way to get us banned?"

"What's banned?"

"Not stocked at the libraries. What's going to happen to us, then?"

When it came to a point of that sort Delia always knew on which side her bread was buttered. She had drawn as it were closer, snuggling up to Aubrey with an affectionate look.

"What a shame to tease the nice old thing!" she had cooed. "Do you know, Aubrey, I think it's so clever of you to have written Pat and me! I can't think how you do it! How do you think of it all? Is it just genius? Where do you get the ideas? Do they just come? . . . And I will be good. I promise. I'll be as good as Rosamond. And you will get me oodles of readers, won't you—Aubrey—dear?"

But the most curious thing of all was that, even now, with his book finished, Aubrey was never quite sure of the personal appearance of this creature who, from being nobody at all, had ended by thrusting everybody but Pat and herself clean off the stage. Of her caprices, impulses, ingrained selfishness, he was overwhelmingly sure; but of her exterior manifestation—no. Only her voice he sometimes almost

heard, fickle and soft. For the rest, she might have been fair or dark, tall or small, blue-eyed or speckled or brown. Her features were composite, picked up here and there, in streets or tubes or restaurants. Often he lingered at shop-windows, in search of clothes that seemed appropriate to his creation.

And suddenly something that looked rather like Delia's style caught his eye on the other side of Pountney Place.

"Hallo, we'll have a look at that," said the suddenly wide-awake Aubrey; and he crossed the street.

The object that had caught his eye was a hat, half hidden behind the sunblind of one of those so private-looking little shops. It was the only thing in the window, a ruffle of pale green and white, as if a seabird had alighted in a rock-pool. He looked round the awning at it on its slender wooden stand.

At the same moment he was aware that he was being looked at in return.

Now privacy or no privacy, if there is one kind of window into which one may peer without offence, surely it is the window of a shop. And yet those small-paned Pountney Place windows had such an intimate look as well! Nobody peers into intimate interiors. All the same, Aubrey was being watched through the chink of a net half-curtain. He was caught, moreover, in a divided mind. He would have felt singularly foolish if he had had to explain that he had crossed the street to try the effect of a hat upon a person who had no existence, and yet that was the

simple truth. So he turned away, walking past the sunblind.

The watcher made a simultaneous movement to the other side of the window.

Now Aubrey Kneller was engaged to be married. He had, therefore, a perfectly good reason for buying a hat if he wished to. And he felt piqued and played with, and in a sense challenged. He stepped back to take a look at the frontage. The sunblind was a new one and bore no name ; obviously the shop had not been opened very long. The bricks of that house-shop were old and mellow, its windows flat-sashed, and many-angled zinc chimney-cowls made ragged the skyline over the parapet. Below was a white-washed area, and four whitened steps rose to the door, which stood open. But the door just within on the right was closed, and bore a brass plate with the words " Please ring " on it.

As if he had been dared to do so, Aubrey mounted the steps.

It must have been a very lightly-poised bell, for Aubrey was hardly aware that his finger had touched it. But from somewhere inside the shop there came a low silver trilling. And after all, a shop is a shop, even if one does have to ring for admittance.

The door opened ; but so negligible was the mien of the person who opened it that Aubrey entered with hardly a glance at her.

III

The parlour was all a soft pigeon-grey, with a grey carpet fitted close up to the walls and sheeny grey curtains giving access to the room or rooms behind. Its smell was that of the Burlington Arcade, a public sort of mingling of anybody's powder, sachet, cream. Half a dozen small water-colour carnivals hung on the walls, done with much white, which pervaded their thick impasto like a bloom of cosmetic. The slanting sunblind outside gave the place the cool light of the interior of a marquee. But for the hat in the window, the room was to all appearances a living-room—barring again the tall cheval-glass and a half-unpacked carton, frothing with tissue-paper. Aubrey looked round for the person in charge—for the child who had admitted him could hardly be she.

But he saw nobody else, and she stood there waiting. So he looked at her again.

Only slightly did she seem to detach herself from the prevailing hues of the room. Her complexion seemed as pervaded with white as the carnivals on the walls. Her dress was an indeterminate scrambled-egg of yellow and white, without either intention or design.

"Well, here's a plain-headed piece of goods," was Aubrey Kneller's first thought.

But the next moment, "Heavens alive!" he had almost exclaimed outright. "What in the name of goodness has she been doing to her mouth?"

It was a blur of greasy crimson. It must have taken half a lip-stick to do. Dreadful experiment! One would hardly have supposed that the rawest novice could have made such a hash of it! "How truly distressing!" was Aubrey's first comment.

But she lifted eyes of the colour of the glass marble one sees in the constricted neck of a soda water bottle, and spoke in a voice that reminded him of something or somebody, though for the life of him he could not remember of what.

"Good afternoon, sir."

"Good afternoon. May I see the hat in the window?"

"Won't you sit down, please?"

She fetched the hat from the window. He asked her to put it on her head. She did so, placing herself before the cheval-glass. Her cropped string-coloured hair made little cheekpieces over her ears, and her thin arms, bare midway between elbow and shoulder, had a pathetic defencelessness as she adjusted that seabird of a hat. Then she turned, the glassy eyes full of apprehension.

And "Execrable, execrable!" Aubrey Kneller thought to himself; but, being a kind-hearted man, and unwilling to wound the feelings even of such a snippet as this, "Charming, charming!" he murmured. "Quite charming—on you——"

The next moment she had astonished him by saying, in a small timorous voice, "It is Mr. Kneller, isn't it?"

He recovered himself. Ah ! So *that* was why she had peeped at him through the curtain ! She had seen his photograph in the papers, and had recognised him !

“ Yes, my name is Kneller,” he confessed.

“ Mr. Kneller the author ? ”

“ Yes, I am an author.”

“ How wonderful ! ” she breathed.

He disclaimed the wonderfulness of it, but for a moment she seemed almost to assert herself.

“ Oh, but it is ! To sit down and make up people ! I can’t imagine how you do it ! I can’t think how you begin ! How do they come to you ? Is it just genius ? Are they all people you know ? Or what ? ”

He laughed a little. “ So that was why you peeped through the curtains ? ”

Once more she was abashed. “ Oh, it was rude ! I’m so sorry ! But you’ve no idea how lonely it is in here, with hardly anybody coming in——”

“ Do you mean to say you’re here all alone ? ” he asked. Less and less did she seem the sort of person to be carrying on an enterprise that depended on a few specialised articles, stiff prices, and salesmanship of a highly intensive order.

“ Oh, no ! There’s Mathilde. She does the upstairs part. But I look after down here. It’s all my idea. Don’t you like my pictures ? ”

It was evidently from the pictures that she had got that terrible mess of a mouth. He longed to wipe it clean for her. But for that she might not have been so much amiss. The green and white of the hat did at

least repeat those glassy eyes and the pastel white of her matt skin. But those lips——!

“I wonder,” Aubrey said suddenly, “whether I might say something very personal?”

“What?” she said, frightened again.

“Why have you done that to your lips?”

He could have bitten his tongue off. Dismay rushed into her face, wildly her eyes sought the glass. He saw her reflection tilted in it, the mouth on which he had remarked a shapeless open smear.

“*Oh!*” she wailed. “And I did so try!”

The next moment she had thrown the hat on a chair and had fled through the curtains at the back of the room.

And with her disappearance it came all at once over Aubrey to wonder what he was doing in that parlour at all. He felt a little confused in his head. He had been walking along Pountney Place. He had crossed the street to look at a hat. And without quite knowing how it had happened he had found himself in this grey, scented place, saying wounding things to this scrap of a child. Why? What business of his was it what she did with her mouth?

“Time I was pushing along,” he muttered to himself.

She came back very quietly. The pigeon-grey curtains hardly seemed to part to admit her. She stood just within them, in an attitude that made him feel ashamed of himself, so crushed and humble was it. The crimson smear was gone.

He felt that it was his duty to speak first. He took

a step towards her. He was a big man, and felt his bigness the more by the side of her sligh tness.

" You know my name," he said gently. " May I ask yours ? "

He understood her to say that it wasn't quite settled yet.

" I don't mean your business-name. I see your shop's new. The reason I ask is that I want to apologise very humbly for hurting your feelings just now."

" Is it better now ? " she asked faintly.

Indeed there had been no need to bedaub that mouth with paint. It had its own tender appealing charm, a pale carnation, that did not quite close upon the nacre within. Why would girls always be trying to make themselves something they were not ! She was standing at attention for his inspection, so close that he could smell the soap or other preparation with which she had cleansed herself. The string-coloured hair was pushed quite back from her brow.

" And now if you will put the hat on again," he said, his eyes on hers, " it would give me very great pleasure if you would keep it on."

She fell back, as if disbelieving her ears. " What ? For myself ? To keep ? " she gasped.

" If I might be allowed."

" Oh ! "

The little stir of blood in her cheeks touched him infinitely. Poor little phantom ! More likely than not she did not get enough to eat. Most, most likely ; for,

now that he looked again, those arms in the cut-off sleeves, though frail, were exquisitely boned. Her lines, sketchily drawn and unfilled-out, had a certain witchery . . . which was precisely the reason why he suddenly placed a spindley gilt chair for her. Aubrey was forty-four, old enough to be her father. Anyway, that clove-pink of a mouth was better a little farther away.

"Tell me about yourself," he said abruptly. "Who are your people?"

She hadn't any people.

"What, nobody at all?"

"I'm an orphan," she sighed.

"How old are you?"

"I—I call myself nearly eighteen."

"You call yourself! Don't you know?"

"Please don't," she begged, in a failing voice.

Poor little brat, he thought compassionately! Who was he, to torture her with questions that she couldn't answer? The workhouse, no doubt, or the Foundling Hospital steps. Chance-named according to any matron's will. Better people than she have not always found their birth-certificates easy to come by. The ignominy of it! If it gave her a moment's pleasure he was glad he had offered her the green and white hat.

She began to talk, diffidently, falteringly, every now and again lifting worshipping eyes to him. She talked of that narrow grey-hued parlour in which she spent her days. She talked of the two or three clients who had called, of how so far they had bought nothing, of

the people who passed the window. And as she talked an arresting thought fastened itself on Aubrey Kneller.

It had something to do with her voice. It was a voice he had heard somewhere before. It was the voice of somebody he knew a good deal about. The solution was on the tip of his tongue, but still it eluded him. It was tantalising. He couldn't let it alone——

In such cases Aubrey Kneller had a device that frequently, if not always, succeeded. This was to try to forget that he was trying to remember anything at all, to make his mind as complete a blank as he could, and to spell slowly through the alphabet, listeningly, alertly, a letter at a time, with long pauses.

So, as the girl ran on, with gradually gathering courage, "A," thought Aubrey Kneller, and paused. Did the thing of which he was in search begin with A? Apparently not.

"B." Nothing had come of "A." What about "B"? But he had no better success.

"C." Still nothing. (But what a tender little mouth it was now that it was scrubbed!)

"D." *Aha!* Found! Why had he not known at once? Had it not been chiming in his head ever since he had handed the manuscript of his book over the Post Office counter?

Her voice was the voice of Delia Vane.

IV

Now up to six months ago Aubrey Kneller had never seen why books should give any trouble to the writers

of them. His own never had. His Sir Rolands and Sir Guys had flowed smoothly from his fountain-pen, chivalrous and high-minded knights and baronets all. Indeed, he had been not a little pleased with one of his *mots*, which was, that if the writing of books was as toilsome a business as all that the presumption was that the writer had mistaken his job.

But *Delia Vane* had given him nothing but trouble from the very beginning. The final pangs of book-birth had been extreme. And the outcome of his labour had been, not that insignificant Annie Thompson of his first conception, but this other usurper, of whom, though in a sense he was her lord and master, he was secretly afraid.

And now, in that quiet little parlour in Pountney Place, he had already done several totally unexpected things within the short space of a quarter of an hour. He had so far forgotten himself as to remark on what a perfectly strange young woman chose to do with her mouth. On an unaccountable impulse he had given this young person a hat he had intended for his *fiancée*. And—he confessed it to his shame—he had been on the very brink of a desultory little tenderness, in plain words a kiss, that Sir Guy and Sir Roland would never have dreamed of. It was all very bewildering. He hadn't a notion what had happened.

For of course that was sheer nonsense about this child's voice. How could her voice resemble the voice of *Delia*, who had never possessed a voice? Other fantastic similarities there might be. The girl in the

scrambled-egg frock was evidently a sort of Annie Thompson, in so far as she had any individuality at all. He had never been able to visualise this intruder very clearly. And Aubrey Kneller had not become a successful author by wasting his time over such unusual speculations.

Yet nothing comes out of nothing, not even a character in a book. He had not yet forgotten those pangs of the bringing forth of *Delia Vane*. There *had* been those quarrelsome scenes between this impudent newcomer and his proper heroine, Rosamond. Something *had* happened that had never happened to Aubrey before. And this shop-assistant's voice *was* the very voice of the Delia of his imagining.

Aubrey was conscious of passing through three distinct stages. The first of these was to tell himself that he was not very well. His book had taken more out of him than he had supposed, and indeed, in mere bulk, it was nearly double the length of any of his former books. A stiff brandy-and-soda would have done him good . . . and at that thought he gave a little jump, for never in his life had he drunk brandy-and-soda at that hour of the afternoon.

The second stage was that he found himself gazing furtively at the girl's mouth again. She had sat down in the chair he had placed for her, and he was guiltily aware that he was wishing that he had not placed it quite so far away from his own. She was sitting in an attitude of patient stillness, with her hands folded in her lap. The lids had dropped over the colourless

eyes. The light, troubled little sigh that she gave was the living echo of Annie Thompson in the days when she had promised to be good.

The third phase had a certain slyness about it. Aubrey had thought of a way of bringing those chairs closer together that the tenderest conscience could not have found fault with. Several times, in his books, Sir Guy or Sir Somebody Else had taken forlorn little orphans under their wing, had sheltered and clothed them and had them educated, all in a spirit of purest benevolence. It was as if the lordly mansion should put the thatched roof of the cottage at the park gates. *Honi soit qui mal y pense.* As long as Aubrey moved his chair strictly in this spirit——

But he was not to do so. From somewhere upstairs there came a shrill call.

“*Marie-e-e-e!*”

Swiftly the girl sprang to her feet. She spoke in a hurried whisper:

“It’s only Mathilde—I’ll see what she wants—I shan’t be a minute——”

She was off, a vanishing sprite of yellow and white.

With her disappearance Aubrey seemed again to come to himself. He passed his hand over his brow. It all seemed dreamy; he had an idea that he had been mixing up people who had no existence with those who had. What had those figments, Annie Thompson and Delia Vane, to do with his *fiancée*, Helen Boyd, whom he was to meet at Rumpelmayers’ at four? And what was this about a voice? The only

voice he heard was the sound of a neighbouring clock, striking four already.

He sprang to his feet. If she wasn't back in a moment he must walk out of the place.

But he had given her a hat, and hadn't paid for it.

He was about to call when she appeared ; and oh, how very much more she was in the picture now ! For she had changed her frock. She was dressed for the street, in shabby black, with a dusty black velvet tam dragged over the cheekpieces of her hair. Merely a little milliner's run-about, like a thousand others, sent out with a parcel and her 'bus fare in her pocket ! He had her placed—yes, even to the parcel, for she crossed to the carton with the tissue-paper, put the lid on it, and began to tie the package with a narrow green-and-white band that she spun from a wooden reel.

Then once again the sound of her voice gave him that secret thrill.

" What did I do with my gloves ? "

" Are these they ? "

" Oh, thank you. . . . I'm ready now."

Observe, she did not say, " I've got to go out ; will you pay for the hat now or leave an address ? " She merely announced that she was ready, as if he had called for the purpose of taking her out. And Aubrey Kneller, known novelist, was in some sort a public man. Not that it really mattered, of course. Still, to be seen in broad daylight in the company of a *midinette* with a bandbox over her arm—that apparently was her innocent idea——

"I must be getting along, too," he said, he hoped not too pointedly.

She must have been extremely sensitive. Immediately there happened the same thing that had happened when he had commented on the overpainted mouth. She winced. She shivered forlornly. She seemed to become sizes smaller.

And could he, with that other piteous "Oh!" still in his memory, say to her, "I mustn't be seen with you; it's one thing to be on the point of kissing you in a private room, but I shall have to cut you in the street; perhaps I'll look in another day and kiss you when nobody can see us?"

He couldn't. He heard the passing of a taxi. He stepped to the door and hailed it with his stick.

"Which way are you going? Can I drop you anywhere?" he said.

Half a minute later they were speeding along Pountney Place, with the bandbox between them, half on her knees, half on his.

V

Helen Boyd waited in Rumpelmayers' with her Academy catalogue on her knee. She was not sorry to sit down, for, besides the Academy, she had done several miles of shopping, and the miles in London and the mile over the mountains at home were not the same thing. Neither was she impatient. It was quite amusing sitting there, watching the people who came

in, went out or passed up and down St. James's Street. He was late, but she was sure he had said Rumpelmayers' at four, and even if there had been a mistake there was always the flat in King Street, not three minutes' walk away.

She was not in the least embarrassed that the young man who also waited in the outer shop apparently found the view in her direction as pleasant as that in any other. She was quite capable of going up to him and saying, "Do you mind turning your chair so that it faces another way?" So her cool, interested eyes continued to look past the cakes and candied fruits in the window, the young man continued to look at her, and Aubrey Kneller continued to be late.

She thought her engagement to Aubrey such an excellent thing for Aubrey himself. She was the practical one; he had to have the artistic temperament. His temperament reminded Helen of a muslin bag, through which he strained things, and out came the most extraordinary results. He had strained Helen herself that way, and out had come a Rosamond or a Margaret or a Phyllis. And of course she managed him. When he came to stay with them in the country she had everything just-so for him—sprayed the roses in her prettiest frock (but didn't tell him that she used somebody's soapy bath-water for the purpose), wore her prettiest shoes for him (and said nothing about her sloshy old gum-boots that hung upside-down in the potting-shed with hay in the toes of them to dry). He made quite a lot of money by his trade, and Helen,

at twenty-six, was some years past thinking that money didn't matter, even in love.

The pertinacity of the young man was getting more amusing every moment. He was trying to—what was the expression?—to “get off” with her. How funny men were! So single in their aims! He was doing his utmost to make her look at him! He had a vacant, likeable sort of face, dissipated perhaps, but with the right sort of come-from. She didn't think she would tell Aubrey what this young man was trying to do. He was inclined to take such things a little fussily. He himself seemed to have a blind spot as far as women were concerned, and his attitude to them never gave Helen a moment's anxiety. A little lacking in devil? That didn't matter. Helen would find devil enough for two.

She put up her catalogue again, but immediately dropped it as a taxi drew up at the door. At last! She gave a quick glance at her wrist-watch, not in the least crossly, but just to know the time. Then, with a slight start, she looked up in time to see Aubrey lifting his Homburg hat to somebody. The taxi moved away, and Aubrey entered Rumpelmayers'.

“Hallo, Kneller,” said the young man whose eyes had made the overtures to Helen; and Aubrey gave him a brief nod as he advanced to Helen. He was a bustle of insincere apologies; he, too, looked at his watch.

“So sorry—more than five minutes late—I make it twenty-three minutes to five——”

"I was a little early," Helen remarked.

Nevertheless she was perfectly sure that Aubrey *had* said four o'clock, and not half-past. "Who was that?" she asked, as they passed into the inner room.

"That chap? Oh, his flat's on the same landing as mine. I sometimes wonder whether my telephone belongs to me or to him. His name's Upwester. He's a peer of sorts."

"I didn't mean that young man. I meant who were you speaking to in the taxi."

"Oh!" Aubrey gave an easy laugh. "Oh! Now I'm going to say something that sounds silly. I haven't the least idea who it was!"

She thought it sounded particularly silly. But "Do you mean somebody was taken ill and you picked them up?" she asked with concern.

"No, no, no," he reassured her. "I was shopping. She was in a great hurry. She didn't ask me. I offered it. A very great hurry, and she looked very tired, and it was the only taxi—you surely don't mind a casual little thing like that, darling?"

"Of course not!" The blue eyes under the duckling-yellow brows were wide open. "And you look tired yourself, dearest!"

"Yes. That beastly book. Took rather a lot out of me. Anyway it's finished with now."

"Here comes your neighbour."

Upwester had entered with the lady for whom he had been waiting. A glance at her sufficed to set Aubrey wondering whether she was the "Bee" on the Museum

Exchange with whom Upwester communicated so frequently. Had Aubrey been on such merry terms with a lady as Upwester seemed to be with this one, he would have preferred to have a telephone of his own.

"Rather a sad face, don't you think?" Helen was saying.

Sad? Upwester? No, Aubrey couldn't see that. Judging from things he had heard, Upwester's flat was no abode of sadness.

"I mean a sort of lost-child expression," said Helen, "I dare say," Aubrey answered off-handedly. "Upwester's life and mine run on different lines."

It was nearly true. So, hitherto, they had.

VI

He had just told Helen that his book was off his hands; but as he sat there, with a bright smile on his face, automatically talking, he was conscious of another disquieting little parallel that up to that moment he had not remembered. It was this:

The Pat of his book—that Sir Patrick Archdale who originally was to have married Rosamond in the last chapter—this *preux chevalier* had been sent by Aubrey, his master, with a large bunch of roses as a gift to Rosamond. The compliment with which he was to have presented them had cost Aubrey quite a lot of thought. But Pat, the mere creature, had demurred at the words put into his mouth; that is to say, Aubrey had written the elaborate little phrase

and had then struck it out again. Pat's voice had sounded almost audibly in his mind.

"But look here, my dear old tin of fruit," Pat had protested, almost contemptuously, "nobody talks like that nowadays! Why don't you give us a chance? Why can't you let us run our own show?"

"And keep Rosamond waiting?" Aubrey had taken up his part in this little drama of which the stage was only a few inches wide.

"Heaps of time. I'm not meeting her till four-thirty."

"What's that? I told you four o'clock."

"Oh, we've altered that!" Pat had replied.

A character alter an author's time-table, carefully worked out with regard to every exigency of the plot!

"You've *what*?" Aubrey had gasped.

"Changed it. We can look after ourselves. She can have her roses, but I'm damned if I'm going to make that silly speech about them!"

The next day the sub-plot of the book had thickened even more menacingly. Aubrey, sitting with Helen in Rupmelmayers', remembered a certain alternative draft that had, as authors say, "written itself," almost without his co-operation. He had promptly discarded it, but in the end had had to restore it again. Merely as an experiment, he had written something like this:

Pat. I bought you a bunch of roses, darling, but they dropped with the heat.

Rosamond. Wouldn't they have picked up in water, my loved one?

Pat. Oh, I wouldn't give you a dud lot like that !

Rosamond. Ever thinking of me ! Ah, that flowers, so fair to-day, so faded to-morrow, should be the symbol of the love of unchanging hearts !

Pat. Eh ? Oh, rather ! Quite ! And I say, am I a bit late ? I honestly thought it was four-thirty ! Sorry and all that. I had to see a man.

At this point Aubrey Kneller, sitting in Rumpelmayers' tea-shop, blushed suddenly and violently. He remembered the gesture with which he had crumpled up that tentative draft and thrown it into the waste-paper basket. He remembered how he had once more rubbed (as it were) his magic ring, and the genie of Archdale had once more appeared. He remembered what had next passed :

" Now look here, Archdale, I want to talk to you," he had said severely.

" Start her up, old thing."

" Who's this man you say made you late for Rosamond ? "

" Feller I know."

" Is he in the book ? "

" Do you mean the telephone-book ? "

" Is he in *my* book, *Delia Vane* ? "

" Shouldn't think so."

" Then where did you pick him up ? "

" Barged into him one day in the Premier Lounge."

" Where's that ? "

" Dover Street, of course."

" I know the Bath Club in Dover Street, and

Browns' and Batts' and the Sesame. I never heard of any Premier Lounge."

"West side, near the bottom. You can get your hair cut there."

"Didn't I tell you to go straight to Rosamond?"

"They kept me waiting in the flower-shop."

"Pat, that's untrue. I don't believe you bought those flowers."

"Then go and ask 'em in the shop. They're down on your account anyway."

"Then what became of them?"

Then Pat, with a snort that had startled even his creator, had replied: "Well, if you dam-well want to know, I gave 'em to Miss Thompson! She's the only bit of fun there is in your whole blighted book—*haw, haw, haw, haw!*"

Aubrey's throat was dry. He drank some more of Rumpelmayers' excellent tea, which went the wrong way, so that he coughed. And all at once he was afraid.

For what had Pat done that he himself had not been guilty of, and all within an hour and a half? Pat had given Rosamond's roses to somebody else; but had not Aubrey given another woman Helen's hat? Pat had shuffled and lied; but what else had he done to Helen? Pat was trying, as he would have expressed it, to "shake" Rosamond; but had not Aubrey for some time past doubted whether Helen was quite the proper mate for a writer of books?

And worst of all, had there not been that exciting,

disgraceful little scene in the taxi hardly half an hour before ?

For he *had* kissed that little Pountney Place stranger in the black dusty velvet tam. He had kissed her as they turned into Pont Street, and again after that, and again after that. And he had told the driver not to hurry. It was then that the ingenious idea had occurred to him that he might pretend to Helen that he had thought their appointment to be for half-past four. He had told her how pretty her mouth was when she didn't do anything to it, and had kissed it again. Her pallid little face had flushed and glowed. They had sat hand in hand, and he had promised to send people to her shop, and had told her that if ever she was in trouble she must come to him. In a word, he had done almost everything that Sir Rupert or Sir Guy would have nobly condemned.

"And now that you've got a new hat you can chuck that old thing away," he had told her.

"Oh, I couldn't wear the new one all the time!" she had answered.

"You girls are all alike!" he had laughed. "Give you one thing and you want something else! Well, I suppose we shall have to see what can be done——"

And he reddened again, with something nearer even than betrayed honour, when he remembered that if he had only had the sense to stop the taxi a few yards up the street Helen need have known nothing at all about it.

A couple of tables away Upwester and his companion

were laughing, with now and then a glance in Aubrey's direction. A little farther along the wall an electric fan spun, almost invisible in its light cage. It was one of those fans that, besides spinning, moved slowly from side to side. It caught Aubrey's eye. He found something fascinating in its regular movement—a turn to the right, a pause, and then back again to the left. It was as if a shining face stared mildly, now at Upwester and his friend, now at Aubrey and Helen. Its expression changed too. Now, two glistening sectors would stand for a moment still, point to point; then they would flutter and flow and become a single golden spoke. This, too, would pulse and pale, and then dissolve suddenly into a blank.

"Haw, haw, haw, haw! Haw, haw, haw, haw!"

Half the heads in the room turned. It was Upwester's raucous laugh. He was laughing helplessly—*"Haw, haw, haw, haw!"*—and his companion was trying to quieten him.

Aubrey had sprung to his feet. That was twice that afternoon the same thing had happened! He shook with excitement. Again a voice, straight out of a book! The other time it had been the girl in the butter-and-eggs frock who had spoken with Delia's voice; now this was the authentic laugh of Pat Archdale when, in that experimental draft, he had told Aubrey that this new governess creature was the only bit of fun in his whole benighted book!

"Haw, haw, haw, haw!" roared Upwester again, while the faces of strangers also smiled politely, that

somebody should be enjoying himself so. From Upwester to Aubrey turned the fan, from Aubrey to Upwester. It seemed to be beamingly introducing them to one another: "Sir Patrick Archdale—Mr. Kneller—Sir Patrick Archdale—Mr. Kneller——"

"*No, no, no!*" Aubrey wanted to cry. "His name's Upwester—Lord Upwester—he's the flat next to mine, just along the street there——!"

"Miss Marie Somebody—Miss Delia Vane—Miss Marie Somebody—Miss Delia Vane——" seemed to come from the unresting fan.

"*No, no, no!*" Aubrey inwardly shrieked.

"Miss Rosamond De Vere—Miss Helen Boyd—Miss Rosamond De Vere—Miss Helen Boyd—Upwester—Archdale—Miss Marie Somebody—Miss Delia Vane——" the names spun in poor Aubrey's head.

Suddenly, with a laugh almost as loud as Upwester's own, Aubrey, who had been standing up, sat down in his chair again as if he had been poleaxed. Helen was asking him what was the matter. But he only gaped at that fluttering disc of thin brass.

"Not an atom of doubt about it, not an atom of doubt about it, not an atom of doubt about it," was all that he could mutter, over and over again.

VII

Aubrey had planned to get married that autumn. He was in treaty for a house out Rickmansworth way, that should satisfy both Helen's need for air space and a garden and his own convenient nearness to town.

Of course he would have to give up his flat in King Street, and sleep at his club when business happened to keep him late.

But it would be a wrench to give up the flat. He liked its situation, almost at the corner of St. James's Square. He liked to sit in its wide, many-paned window-bay, to look down on the stately park of cars, and to picture to himself which of them had just set down Sir Ronald at the portals of his club or Sir Ronald at the wide doors of the Embassy. He liked King Street, with its china and cabinets and rare prints and two-hundred-guinea guns. He loved the flat itself—the tiny ante-room where the telephone was, the large airy study adjoining, his bedroom leading from it, his bathroom beyond that again, and the little chamber at the end where Clough, his man, slept. He esteemed and respected Clough, from his plain all-round collar to his silent boots. When Clough brought Aubrey a card on a salver Aubrey was often on the point of placing half-a-crown there instead of picking up the card. And a spot of dust anywhere about the place would have been a spot on Clough's conscience.

But as Aubrey sat in his study late that night the flat seemed somehow all wrong. Not that an article was out of place. The porcelain clock was right to a second—five minutes to one. His books had not been touched, his chairs stood in their proper places, only the flowers had been taken out for the night and placed in the bathroom. He knew that if he went to the telephone there would not be a breath on its glass

mouth-piece and that not a peerage or guide would be a fraction out of alignment. To open the door of his bedroom would be like opening a box of confectionery straight from the makers.

Yet something was amiss. It was as if an alteration had taken place in the air, giving things harsher edges than usual. He felt as if he had somebody's else's spectacles on, not quite suited to his eyes. Somehow the place would have been better for a little litter—something half-unpacked, say with tissue-paper lying about. A smell, a feminine smell for preference, of powder or burning incense-paper, would have been a change from its tiresome cleanliness. And he was sick of those two Cox water-colours. He wanted to put up something garish and modern and rather extravagant in their places. And it was depressingly quiet. It wanted voices, voices of a certain *timbre*. It wanted whatever it was that rooms did take from their occupants. Anyway it wanted something.

Suddenly he sat up in his chair, listening. Then he sank back again. The gates of the lift-cage had clashed on the landing outside, and Upwester had come home, apparently bringing a number of his friends with him, for there had been sounds of muffled laughter.

The door of the other flat banged, and Aubrey resumed his reverie.

No, it wasn't the room; it was he himself who had changed. He had been changing for months past, imperceptibly and day by day. With each completed chapter of *Delia Vane* he had changed a little more,

and he didn't think it would make the least bit of difference now if he did send for the manuscript of his book back. He had done his work. He could destroy it, but he could not alter it. Nobody, reading his most famous book, *Loved I Not Honour More*, would suppose that *Delia Vane* could possibly have come from the same pen. He knew that he had placed his professional reputation in the gravest jeopardy, and that the odds were a thousand to one that if *Delia* had any success at all it would be a *succès de scandale*.

Suddenly the door across the corridor opened again. Again the gale of muffled laughter was heard, and through it Upwester's boisterous "*Haw, haw, haw!*" They were gathered outside his own door. He heard Upwester's words:

"Dig the ol' feller out—all in there by himself—*hoi!* Kneller! Show a leg! Want you to come to my party! Come into the body o' the kirk! Come and 'joy yourself!"

A drumming on Aubrey's door accompanied the invitation.

Aubrey had half-risen from his chair. Often as he had been made aware of Upwester's nocturnal revels he had never been asked to take part in them before. Had he been asked he would certainly have refused, for he did not approve of this figure who had sometimes shot up the lift-shaft at dawn, with a large metal motor-spirit advertisement reverberating in his arms as a trophy and a cloakroom-ticket still stuck in the band of his opera-hat. But to-night was different.

He was weary to death being alone. It was rather decent of Upwester to have asked him. Why not go in for an hour?

As he opened his door there was a clap of laughter, at which the very cars parked in the Square might have shied. It took Aubrey a moment to realise what had happened. Then he saw the joke. The peer had been standing on his hands with his feet against the upper panels of the door, and he lurched in full-length, feet first.

"*Haw, haw, haw! Haw, haw, haw!*" he laughed as he lay on the ground.

"Sssh—don't wake my man!" Aubrey begged, his fingers on his lips.

The nobleman picked himself up. "Bring him in, Bee," he cried, hospitably. "Let him come to the party—'sname Kneller—'sname author—lets me use his telephone—bring him in—come on, Kneller——"

He seized Aubrey by the waist and pulled his door to behind him.

VIII

So *this* was the place where his neighbour turned night into day and broke Aubrey's rest with the liquid howls of his water-whistle! As a first impression of Upwester's flat, Aubrey was put in mind of a visit he had once paid to Madame Tussauds'. There, figures that he had taken for dummies had suddenly moved a hand or a head, but had been dummies after all; and others, that he had taken to be dummies also, had

smiled at Aubrey and walked away. So it was here. The room was almost as dim as a photographer's dark-room, dyed deep by the rosy silk-shaded lights. He hardly knew whether a thing was animate or inanimate till it moved, and even then he might have been mistaken. He couldn't count them, but he had the feeling that there were quite a lot of people about him. Here and there the sudden glow of a cigarette would momentarily light up a face, which would then go out again. A soft huddle of colour at the end of a divan might have been a heap of cushions, until it stirred and resolved itself into a lady, curled up in the least possible compass, and nursing an unslipped foot in one hand. What looked like a piece of tapestry over the mantelpiece *might* have been a sheet-iron advertisement of a motor spirit, and standing near a door was a figure that Aubrey supposed to be Upwester's servant, until a struck match showed it to be a stuffed brown bear holding out a tray. He hadn't a notion who anybody was. The mingled smell of cigarettes and perfume was subtly exciting. His host was introducing him, genially and at large.

"Here he comes. 'Swellknown author. Forgotten what his books are, but dam good; must read 'em, everybody. This is Kathleen. Give him a cigarette, somebody; they're on the bear. Think you know Bee, Kneller; she's always using his telephone; dashed good of him. Writes books. Not much of a reading man myself, but dashed proud all same. Hoi, Sylvie, come and say how-d'ye-do to friend of mine,

Mr. Kneller. Writes hics. Beats me where he gets his ideas from ; couldn't write a hic to save my life. Give him a drink. Have a drink, Aubrey, ol' man."

The drink was brought to Aubrey by a young person in a calyx of flimsy skirt held up by a pair of ribbon braces. A large woolly Bonzo pup nestled in one soft white arm, and she asked Aubrey if she hadn't met him at the Saturn Club. A young man seated on the bear's pedestal was making soft terrier-like yelps on that whistle that Aubrey knew so well, and he broke off to ask how long the kippers were going to be. Aubrey suddenly smelt the kippers. Apparently they were cooking in Upwester's bedroom, for the door opened, showing a bright glimpse. The bedroom was the counterpart of Aubrey's own, but of course placed the other way round, which, nevertheless, surprised Aubrey a little. It had been turned to the purpose of a ladies' cloak-room, for piled high on the bed were wraps and furs and cloaks and stoles. On the small bedside table stood a chafing-dish, over which a tall fair-haired youth busied himself with a fork. As the kippers were cooked, two at a time, a young woman set them down before the orange pillars of the electric fire to keep hot. Upwester was introducing Aubrey all over again.

"Splendid author. Full o' brains. Going to put us all into his book, large as life. Lots o' copy for him. Put Sylvie in, too—give him 'nother drink——"

That it was "copy" had occurred to Aubrey too. These merry, careless, perhaps not quite reputable people, who sipped their sweets as they came, certainly

were a new aspect of life to him. And now that he was here he intended to enjoy himself. He began to think that he had misjudged his neighbour and his charming friends. One was only young once. . . . There was a movement among the cushions where the girl nursed the silk-clad foot, moving her tiny toes about inside. One large liquid eye looked roguishly at Aubrey. Aubrey smiled back. He might ask her to make room for him presently.

"May I help myself, Upwester?" he asked.

"Pleasure—all there is!" cried the peer.

It was a full round Burgundy that Aubrey drank, and he wanted to ask Upwester where he got it. Sound stuff; a few dozen of that wouldn't be amiss in his own flat! Capital cigarettes, too; Aubrey made a note of the brand. And a devilish pretty bunch of girls old Upwester had got together, too, by Jove! Why shouldn't Aubrey give a party like this? True, there was Clough. Very good servant Clough was, and knew Aubrey's ways; but whose flat was it, Clough's or Aubrey's? Hang Clough! Clough would have to do as he was told. Aubrey wasn't going to consult Clough about what kind of party he gave. Jolly nice party, and jolly good host, and jolly girls——

The bedroom door opened again, and the tall fair-headed young man who had cooked the kippers marched in with them on a dish. But what was this figure that followed, with plates and what-not piled up on a tray? Eastern, that gold and purple attire? A houri, summoned by the clapping of a caliph's hands?

No. Merely Miss Teddy Seymour, of the "Thalia," dressed in Upwester's silk sleeping-suit. Aubrey found himself clapping rhythmically with the rest as the procession of two made the tour of the room. He laughed, he laughed ; and "*Haw, haw, haw, haw, haw, haw!*" sounded Upwester's guffaw.

Never before in his life had Aubrey Kneller eaten kippers at three o'clock in the morning ; never before in his life had he been unable to remember how many glasses of Burgundy he had drunk nor what he had drunk when the Burgundy was finished. "Taste mine," said the young female with the calyx of skirt, putting her glass, not directly to his lips, but in such a manner that that scented white arm was passed about his neck. Her nape was shingled, and she had a fringe of hair, so that the eyes that sparkled through it should not be too bright to bear.

"I live next door," Aubrey by and bye heard himself saying, first to one young woman, then to another. "All come—whole lot of us ! Bee's coming, 'n Teddy's coming, 'n jolly ol' Upwester—fix night—only next door—'nother jolly party, what?—"

"'S a top-hole author—been trying to get know him for months, haven't I, my jolly old Hicspeare, what?" Upwester was saying, now here, now there. "'Novelist—I saw him this afternoon—*haw, haw, haw!* Saw him in the tea-shop ! Says good-bye to a girl in a taxi 'n meets 'nother one next minute—*haw, haw, haw!* He's a lad. Mus' read his books. Get 'em at Mudie's. Times Booclub. Look at him—got a crush on Sylvie

now ! Saw him with girl in a taxi—*haw, haw, haw !*”

“ Once my face was as fair as a lily,
But look at the funny thing now ! ”

softly sang the girl with one slipper, holding up a tiny mirror in her hand.

An electric bell was heard to trill.

“ Who’s that ? ” Upwester called. “ Bobbie an’ Lou, I expect. Let ’em in, somebody—night’s young yet—’sintroduce jolly ol’ Kneller to Bobby an’ Lou——”

The door of the dark-room opened, a glimmer of white silk muffler became pink, and in came Bobby and Lou.

Aubrey Kneller woke at midday the next day, and immediately went to sleep again. Coming out of his flat sometime during the afternoon he encountered Upwester, also coming out. At the sudden stopping of the lift that took them down together Aubrey’s hand went to his aching head, but Upwester had a flower in his buttonhole and looked as if he had just stepped out of a bandbox. “ Morning,” said the peer curtly ; and later—for a dog’s body could have done all the thinking of which Aubrey was capable that day—later it occurred to Aubrey that Helen had said of Upwester that he had a sad face. Aubrey, by a great effort, might have summoned up a grin of sorts that afternoon after the night before ; but neither by word nor look did Upwester refer to the party. Perhaps that was what Helen had meant. It is sad to know beforehand

that even if you make a vow you will not keep it. It is sad to vow over and over again, until at last you vow that you will vow no more, but go whither the stream takes you. It is sad, between a sin and the next, fatalistically to shoulder the burden, without either a look behind or a hope to come. All this was in that curt, prohibitive "Morning" of Upwester's. And Aubrey Kneller's subsequent recollection of these things was part of the grief to which he came—the grief that is knowledge.

IX

Aubrey was in the habit of writing to Helen twice a week. He wrote to her what books he had read, what plays or pictures seen, sent her his press-cuttings, told her how matters were progressing about the Rickmansworth house. Her letters to him were full of how the gardens were looking, how the hens were laying, who had been to tea. Never on either side was there as much as a peep into that surging little world of images that lies between a writer and the tip of his pen.

But now he felt that either he must write to Helen straight out of that teeming little world or not write at all. What was the good of writing if the words came, not as a heart beats, but as a clock ticks? One morning he tried to tick off a letter to Helen. He stuck half way through. If he had written what he wanted to write he would have said, "Of course you see that all this is perfunctory, insincere rubbish.

If it were not a Tuesday I don't suppose I should be writing to you at all. I know before you write it what your answer will be. And so we shall go on, and marry, and live the life that is expected from people in our position, and I shall get just a little bit tired of you—and I'm not sure as a matter of fact that I'm not a bit tired of you now." That was what he would have written, and since it was out of the question to write it he left the empty addressed envelope on his desk and went out for a walk.

He walked across St. James's Square and up towards Jermyn Street, and then turned to the right in the direction of Lower Regent Street. And he knew that with every step he took he was telling a lie to himself. His destination did not lie that way at all. He was going to Pountney Place. Yet, despising himself for the subterfuge, he continued the pretence for a little longer. Then, in the middle of the Haymarket, he suddenly stopped. "Damned if I'm going on humbugging myself like this," he muttered. A row of taxis waited. He jumped into the first of them.

"Pountney Place," he said.

"Any number, sir?"

"Yes. No, I mean. The far side. I'll tell you."

He didn't know the number. He didn't know the name either. Now that he remembered, the new sunblind that had hidden the little Georgian window like an eyelid had not borne a name at all.

That suddenly struck Aubrey as absurd. A business without a name! Why, businesses ought to be given

names before they started, not afterwards! There ought to have been months of advance-advertising! And the giving of names to things was Aubrey's peculiar trade. Sitting there in the smooth-running taxi he sought a name for the shop in Pountney Place.

"Delia," of course—with or without the "Robes" or "Modes," just as she liked, but obviously "Delia." In flowing script, diagonally across the blind. Capital D-e-l——, with his forefinger he wrote the name in the air. And perhaps the final "a" ending in a scroll. So intent on his flourishes was he that the taxi had almost passed the demure little shop. He alighted, paid off the taxi, mounted the whitened steps, and once more touched the bell under the brass plate.

Again she answered the ring herself. Again she wore the featureless frock of yellow and white. But he saw, or fancied he saw, a notable change in her. That first time he had called he had had the impression that if he took his eyes off her she might in some way elude him. Only that daub of a mouth had made as it were an exaggerated bull's eye for his eyes to rest on. But now her cheeks had a faint diffused flush. Her hair had a softer sheen. The soda-water-bottle eyes glowed more lively, even her frail arms seemed to have acquired a substance. Nor was it that he saw her now in the morning light, whereas before it had been afternoon. Aubrey knew very well what it was. He knew exactly what she was thinking of. She had flushed at the recollection of those kisses in the taxi. She glowed more deeply still.

"Good-morning, sir," she said, her lids downcast. He laughed a little—" ' Sir ? ' "

"Mr. Kneller."

"That's better. Well, how are you ? "

"I'm very well, thank you. Won't you sit down ? "

"Is Mathilde in ? "

"No."

"Well, what were you thinking of doing about luncheon ? "

She told him that she usually had a scone and butter in there.

"A scone and butter ? I said lunch ! " he laughed.

"I don't eat very much."

"You don't look as if you did. Well, I hardly mean that perhaps. You look charming. You make we want to kiss you again."

"Don't, Mr. Kneller," she faltered. "I've made up my mind to be good."

"What ? Is a kiss such a terrible crime ? "

"I oughtn't to have let you."

He passed his arm about her and tilted up her face.

"No ? " he smiled.

"You see I only sell hats, and you're a famous man," she faltered.

"I never heard that famous men went without kisses. There ! " He set his lips to her reluctant ones. "And there, and there ! Now forget all about that scone and butter. I'm going to take you out to lunch."

There was nothing about his being seen in the com-

pany of a *modiste* now. What, was he a snob, that he should deny in public somebody he kissed in private? He rather hoped not! He would not only take her out; he would "do" her as well as he would have done himself. The Hyde Park Grill was quite near. Aubrey chuckled, rubbed his hands.

"Come, get your things on," he said. "We're going to the Hyde Park."

She fell back almost in terror, her slender fingers pressed into her cheeks. The Hyde Park! Perhaps, passing that establishment in her dusty velvet tam with her bandbox over her arm, she had ventured to lift her eyes to its frontage, but to enter its portals——!

"Oh!" she breathed; and her "Oh" was the "Oh" of Annie Thompson when Aubrey Kneller, author, had called that restive little creature of his brain to account.

Jocularly he hustled her.—"Come, don't stand there saying 'Oh!'"

"But—but—I haven't anything to wear!" she said, aghast.

"You've that new hat."

"But look at me!"

"I am looking at you. Very nice to look at too. You've frocks here in the shop, haven't you? Get one of those. Shoes? Stockings? What's Harrods' just round the corner for? We'll look in there and rig you up. Hurry, now—it's nearly half-past twelve
——"

He kissed her till her face was rosy, and then pushed her away.

So it was that two of Aubrey Kneller's acquaintances, strolling into the Hyde Park Grill an hour or so later, saw Aubrey at luncheon with (as they put it) "something to make you sit up"—something demure but radiant, in a green-and-white hat and frock of dove-grey marocain, with little shoes pressed together under the table as if her feet were saying their prayers, who lifted innocent-looking eyes to Kneller from time to time. One of these acquaintances happened to be Upwester. His fit of next-morning stiffness was apparently over, for as he passed Aubrey's table on his way out he gave Aubrey a comical, questioning little lift of one eyebrow.

X

Helen wrote slowly, putting her pen almost to the paper and then withdrawing it again, and with meditative sidelong glances out of the window from time to time.

"DEAREST,

"Only a short note to-day, as I——"

"As I what?" she asked herself. Why only a short one to-day?

"as I haven't been sleeping very well. I think it was worrying about you. Is anything the matter, darling? Because you know you promised to tell me

if anything ever was. There was no letter from you on Thursday, and only the merest scrap on Friday, and you've always so much more to write about than I have. Do let me know if anything's wrong. Things here are much as usual. The gardens are looking lovely, and we had forty-six eggs yesterday. All send love, I don't mean all the eggs of course, but the people.

“HELEN.”

“There!” she concluded. “He *did* say four o'clock, and he knows he did, and I *will* find out who she was! He's been up to something for months——”

She sealed and stamped her letter, and put it with the others on the tray in the hall.

Clough brought this letter to Aubrey with his early cup of tea. Then, instead of withdrawing, he waited, as if he wished to say something.

“Well?” said Aubrey drowsily.

“Begging your pardon, sir, but I've been thinking things over,” said Clough.

“Oh? Ah! What? What do you say?” Aubrey yawned.

“It isn't the place, sir. The place suits me. I couldn't wish for a better place.”

“What's this? What do you say?” said Aubrey, sitting up.

“And I'm not saying you aren't the master, sir——”

“Oh? Then what are you saying?”

“About that party, sir. I should wish to speak to

you about it. I suppose those is your orders, sir, and I always have my remedy."

"Tummy out of order or something this morning, Clough?"

"It's not for me to take liberties, sir, either with his lordship or anybody else. But it's all hours of the day and night likewise. It breaks my rest, besides being sinful of itself. Many's the time you've complained about it yourself, sir. So if it's going to begin here, sir, in this flat that I've always looked on as all that a flat should be——"

"Look here, do you mean that I'm not to give a party?" Aubrey demanded, now wide awake.

"I've never said that, sir. There's parties *and* parties."

"Perhaps you don't approve of my guests?"

"I doubt if Miss Boyd would, sir."

"Clough——" said Aubrey.

"Sir?"

"Nothing. I was only thinking what a priceless undertaker you'd make."

"*Sir!*" Clough could not believe his ears.

"And take that filthy wash away and get me a brandy-and-soda."

Aubrey was astonished at himself. A month or two ago he would not have dreamed of using such words to Clough. There had been times when they had been more like cronies than master and man. Especially they had united in deploring the goings-on in the flat across the way. Yet here was Aubrey, not only

ticking his faithful servitor off, but doing so with a relish such as he had seldom known.

Clough drew himself up. "I should wish to give notice at once, sir," he said austerey.

"Righty-oh, Clough. But get the brandy-and-soda first."

"I should wish to give notice, sir," Clough went on zealously, "for your own good—yes, for your own good, sir! It is written in the Book whithersoever these things leads, and you're going the way you shouldn't go, Mr. Kneller! That young female that's begun to come up here——"

"Don't be very long with the drink, Clough."

"If convenient, might we say a week to-day, sir?"

"What, for the drink?"

"For my notice, sir."

"Capital." Clough had reached the door. "Er—Clough!" said Aubrey, and Clough turned.

"Sir?"

"Go to hell."

The door closed behind Clough.

Aubrey lay back on his pillow, chuckling softly. Long-nosed old snuffer! Aubrey wondered what scales had been over his eyes that he should even have taken on a fellow like that—him and his elastic-sided whiskers and pussyfoot boots! Anyway the scales had fallen now, thank the lord, and Aubrey had a keen and exhilarating sense that he saw things as they really were. The idea of his manservant going through his list of guests was the funniest thing he had heard for a

long time ; he shook with laughter at it. Then, as he sat up again with a sigh of contentment, wondering if it would startle Clough still further if he threw a boot at the door, his eyes fell on Helen's letter. He opened it, gave it two flutters, back and forth, took in all there was in it, and laughed again.

Not sleeping very well, she ! She had the nerve to tell him that ! True, he had never seen Helen asleep, but if a dormouse slept more soundly he'd eat his pillow ! A hundred-to-eight she just curled herself up and went off like a squirrel ! So like these people who heard the clock strike once and then vowed they had never closed their eyes all night ! And what was all this about there being something the matter with him ? What should be the matter with him ? He felt lighter and jollier than he had ever felt in his life ! He could laugh at anything ; above all he could laugh at himself. Lord, what a blind, blinkered life he had led ! Those books of his filled from cover to cover with gestures and doings absolutely like nothing on earth ! Those duds, those sticks, those mutts, Sir Hugh and Sir Guy and Sir Wilfred ! Those posing wax dummies out of Swan and Edgar's window, his Phyllises and Rosamonds and Joans ! Not a breath of life in a single one of them—barring that one little skivvy in a shabby black frock and re-soled shoes, who had begun as Annie Thompson, and had grown—and grown—and grown——

Aubrey was in the middle of a luxurious yawn when this particular thought occurred to him. The yawn

was suddenly cut in two. He had remembered the noble gesture with which Rosamond had gathered her skirts about her and had stalked out of his book. She had taken herself off rather than be published between the same covers as this little grasper who had commandeered nine-tenths of the book. There had been too many parallel possibilities already for another of them to be ignored. What, then, of Helen? As Rosamond had disappeared from his book, was Helen going to disappear from his life? Was *that* the meaning of her letter?"

He picked up the letter again, and re-read it in the light of this new intelligence. By Jove, he was right! Unerringly he seemed to read between the lines, with brilliant clearness to divine her thought. He *had* been late that day at Rumpelmayers', and *had* pretended that he had made a mistake in the time. She *had* seen him alight at the door and lift his hat. From that moment on she *had* smelt a rat, and had resolved to know who his companion was. It all explained itself to Aubrey as he lay there in bed.

And then what? Aubrey's own growing intimacy with Upwester—Marie (or, as he had taken it into his head to call her, Delia) lunching and teaing with him whenever she could make the opportunity—Clough dismissing himself rather than countenance this total reversal of his master's life and habits—what did it all mean? People spoke of characters "living" in a book. Certain of these non-existent people had undoubtedly more vitality than most of the so-called

“real” people about them. To have written a real book cannot possibly be without its re-action on the book’s writer. And what does it matter whether people in a book come to life or life comes to them? Life and fiction at the last interfuse, as the glitters come and go on a ventilating-fan that turns on a wall. Already Upwester was what Sir Patrick Archdale should have been. Rosamond, the type of Helen, had left the stage. The little milliner he called Delia now occupied it exclusively. Physically and mentally she had bloomed since that first day in Pountney Place when the crimson daub on her mouth had seemed the only solid thing about her. She was acquiring an air and aplomb with marvellous rapidity. From stage to stage she had formed and built herself up, and now looked like becoming a piece of witchery indeed!

Witchery? Indeed, yes! Aubrey now felt that he had known her poutings and tempers and cajoleries for years! If she took it into her head that she wanted anything, that thing she would have, by whatever means. She would promise or refuse, keep her word or break it, kiss him or not kiss him, but always to the same end—her own. Already her frocks and furs and other what-nots had cost Aubrey something like two hundred pounds. And he liked spending the money on her. At any rate this was life, and what was two hundred pounds compared with life? Hang the money! This was not Helen, with her files and receipts and housekeeping accounts, the corn and meal on one side of them and the eggs balancing them on the

other! Aubrey wanted a change from all that. Helen's letters frankly bored him. She met plenty of other eligible young men at her tennis-parties and so forth. Young Haverford, for example, would make an admirable husband for her. And from the very beginning, had not she and Aubrey always had the arrangement that if either of them ever thought differently about things the whole question was to be freely discussed?

Helen's letter meant that there would soon be a breach. She did not know, but Aubrey knew, that no power on earth could now prevent it. And he lay there in bed, thinking it all over, and lightheartedly humming a tune.

XI

Aubrey's investments were nicely-settled ones, un-speculative, of the safe kind that left his mind free for other matters. Unless a tempting profit was to be taken he rarely thought of disturbing them. But one day not long after all this he rang up his broker and told him to sell a considerable block of stuff and to remit the proceeds to him. His current balance at the bank was never very large considering the comfortable way in which he lived.

Delia of course was at the bottom of it. She had come to Aubrey at his flat one morning in tears. The principal backer of the business in Pountney Place had announced that he must withdraw his support. Her distress moved Aubrey strangely as she asked him,

her small gloved hands working at his lapels, whether he knew anybody who would take over the obligation.

Aubrey asked her this and that. He was no fool about money. He wanted details. But it was the wrong moment. It would drive her to distraction (she said) to have to go into all that now. He looked carefully at her, from her newest shoes to the little chocolate caramel of a hat on her head. The little anguished face that peeped through her furs was once more a pallor of white. Her eyes, frightened at the prospect of being thrown on her own resources again, seemed almost as he had first seen them—of the colour of the glass marble in the neck of a soda-water bottle.

“ You must, you must ! ” she could only moan, the little hands clasped hard together. “ Oh, I’m frightened, I’m frightened, I’m frightened ! ”

The only words in which he could have expressed his concern were that she seemed to be slipping back—back into the colourlessness of the little saleswoman who had first opened the door to him in Pountney Place. And a queer sense of urgency was strong upon him. If she, who had driven everything else out of his mind, went back, then he too would be helpless and alone. The thought filled him also with sudden dread. Not in order to comfort her, but for his own sake, he wanted to take her into his arms and to cover her face and neck and hair with kisses. She was standing at his desk with her hands before her face. He stepped forward.

But she pushed him almost violently back,

"Oh, do leave me alone for once! That's all you think of! Here am I at my wits' end—I don't want to be kissed! I wish you'd never kissed me! You took me out of all that beastly life—you let me see something else——"

"Come, darling, come! The skies haven't fallen yet! We shall find something to do about it. These things have to be examined, you know."

She broke into anger. "Yes, and while you're examining them, as you call it, ruin's staring me in the face! You needn't bother. I shall go to somebody else! I don't care where I go. I shall go to that friend of yours in the other flat! I must know where I stand, and I must know to-day!"

"But be reasonable, darling! Of course I'll help you! But who are your backers? Where are your books? Who are your auditors? I must know these things!"

But she was now furious. Her hand struck the edge of the table.

"You see me in this state and ask me all those things! And you expect me to believe that you love me! What do I know about books? I come to you for help and you simply want to kiss me and make me do sums! Oh, I'm going!" She took a stride to the door.

Her hand was on the knob. She was going to somebody else, perhaps to Upwester. He, too, sprang forward.

"Little goose!" he said softly, patting her shoulder.

"Oh, it's all very well for you!" she stormed. "You buy me a few things and think that's the end of it! You think more of your money than you do of me——"

"Delia!" he cried, hurt.

"You do! You waste money on things I could do without, just because you like me to look smart when I'm with you—it's all you—just who you're seen with—but as soon as *I* want it for something important——"

"Oh, hush, darling! You know I'll do anything for you!"

"Yes, if I'll kiss you!" she cried unrestrainedly. "That's what you think of me!"

"I think you've lovely and wonderful!"

"Lovely and in the gutter! We know what *that* means!" she said scornfully.

"What *is* all this about the gutter? Who mentioned the gutter?" he said, his arms outspread.

"Oh, I'm tired of talking! I'm off!" she cried.

Off—off to Upwester or somebody else! Suddenly he could not endure the thought of it. Lose her—now! He loved her, loved her! He might be a fool. He knew that she was petulant, avaricious, not to be trusted a yard, given to these outbursts of unbridled anger. He knew all this from his book. But he always forgot it all again the moment she crept into his arms, sobbing and penitent, making herself small against him, and then, in the very middle of her tears, looking up at him with a smile and the tiniest little movement of her carnation lips. He had to kiss them

then. He must kiss them now. The money side of the matter could be settled later.

"As if there was any need for all this!" he comforted her. "I promise. Now come and sit down quietly by me."

He led her to the sofa, where she sat down as if all her strings had been cut. He gathered her to his breast. She gave an exhausted sigh.

"Oh, I feel so lonely!"

"Poor little love!"

"Keep your arms round me for a bit."

"Did you think I was going to take them away?"

"Hold me close," she murmured brokenly. "I'm sure if she understood everything she wouldn't mind."

"She? Who?" said Aubrey, a little startled.

"The girl you're engaged to. *Would* she mind, do you think, if she knew?"

"She wouldn't have to," said Aubrey grimly.

"Promise me you'll tell her, though. I should hate to do anything behind her back."

Something, some echo out of that strange little world into which authors peep, seemed to awake in Aubrey's ears. A deep sense of inevitableness came over him; he had the memory of it all before. So it was appointed, so it must be, and the next step was already taken. He put her a little away from him and looked at her gravely.

"But didn't I tell you that was all off?"

"What, Aubrey?" she asked.

"About Miss Boyd. She's written to me breaking it off. Surely I told you!"

She gave a low cry of self-accusation. "Oh, that's me!"

"You?" he said gently. "It's nothing to do with you. At least, it's only this to do with you, that ever since I saw you I've known you've been the woman I dreamed all of along!"

"Oh, oh, what have I done!" she moaned. Then she sprang to her feet. "Oh, Aubrey, I must go! Forget me, forget me! Forget everything about me! Never mind the business; I shall find somebody else. If I don't it doesn't matter. Let me go. Good-bye!"

But he was on his knees before her, his arms about her slender middle. He smelt the perfume of her clothing; he buried his face in it. Though it took every penny he had to keep her she should not go now. They could live there, in that King Street flat. It didn't matter where they lived, so long as it was together.

"Oh, Delia, Delia—marry me, marry me, marry me!" he cried in anguish.

Only a mirror saw that infinitesimally small gleam of triumph in her eyes. It was gone before his own eyes, brimming with supplication, were lifted up to her. She smiled sadly down on him.

"Do get up, Aubrey. You're spoiling my frock," she said.

He kissed her knees and rose. He put on a cheerful, masterful manner.

“ So that’s all right, eh ? We’ll consider that settled, what ? ”

“ Aubrey ! ” she reproached him. “ How can we, all in a moment like this ? She’d be sure to say I’d taken you from her ! Besides, look at you and look at me ! No, it wouldn’t do. And you mustn’t kiss me again. You mustn’t see me again. It isn’t safe. I’ve got too fond of you. Aubrey, do help me to forget ! ”

“ No ! ” he said resolutely. “ I know what I want, and I know what I’m going to have ! So that’s that ! ”

“ Oh, you rush me off my feet—you don’t give me a chance ! ” she quavered.

But even at lunch, which they took presently at Bellomo’s, she still refused to say Yes or No. They had plenty of time, she said. Helen’s feelings must be considered first. So she chatted about the food, the lunchers at the neighbouring tables, and how atrociously the manicuriste had done her nails.

XII

The banking-account that Aubrey opened for Miss Delia Vane, in that name, was convenient for several reasons. If Aubrey was to finance some portion of the business in Pountney Place he would save a transaction by doing so out-and-out, and he and Delia could settle matters between them afterwards. For her personal expenses, which were not inconsiderable, it was hardly fitting that she should have to run to him every time she wanted a few pounds. And Aubrey himself was

not a chartered accountant, but an author, whose royalties had, after all, to be earned, and who must presently be setting about another book unless his fortunes were to experience something like a slump.

He was getting more and more nervous about the book that was to appear in the autumn. It was a good book, but a good book and good business are not necessarily the same thing. And his fears grew on him when he took up his old press-cutting books and read how, in the opinion of the reviewer, his Sir Vivians and Lord Marmadukes gave not only a true and vivid picture of the highest type of English gentleman as he is, but provided all that a happy idealism demanded into the bargain. Aubrey shook his head. The reviewers might be right about the idealism, if by that they meant something that resembled nothing on earth ; but—well, what about Upwester, for example. They say authors are touchy and vain. Aubrey might have been touchy and vain had somebody else pointed out these things. But the scales had fallen from Aubrey's eyes, and now, if he wanted a really good cynical, hearty, wholesome laugh, he picked up his own most successful book, *Loved I Not Honour More*.

The funny thing was that Upwester, to whom he lent this work, and who kept it for a fortnight on the bedside table where the kippers had been cooked, was (as he put it) "all over it." He liked it most enormously—couldn't imagine how Aubrey had done it, nor where he got his ideas from. There was a certain earnestness in his childish eyes as he explained all this to Aubrey.

“ You see, dear old bran-bag,” he confided to Aubrey, helping himself to a whiskey-and-soda from the cupboard that had not been locked since Clough’s departure, “ it’s so exactly what we *ought* to be, you know. That’s really my *idea* of a book, not that I know much about ’em, but if they’re simply what you see about you every day, well, where are you? I mean to say it makes you think. Makes you sort of overhaul yourself. The way you live kind-of-thing. Bee’s a jolly good sort, of course, and there’s the club, that’s all right in a way ; but there’s something else, and that’s where you set us thinking, old boy. We might all of us be better. That the idea? Anyway, come and have a quick one at the club.”

Upwester had put Aubrey up for this club of which he spoke, and at first Aubrey had hardly known what to talk about to the fellows to whom his friend had introduced him. He was indifferent at golf, knew little about cars, less about horses, and had never heard of nine out of ten of the different cocktails that were served at the smoking-room bar. Neither was Aubrey skilled enough at poker to play that game for pound points, in absolute silence, for afternoon after afternoon. Sometimes he dropped out of the conversation altogether, and wandered about the rooms, looking at the rather surprising prints and pictures that paved the walls, with trophies of jockeys’ caps and sketches done by hilarious artists after midnight filling in the chinks between. But Upwester looked after the new member. “ Kneller—writes books, you know—just read one of

'em—top hole"—Aubrey and his job were inseparable on the peer's lips. And when Aubrey, first swearing him to secrecy, confided to him the title of his forthcoming work, Upwester would stand at the bar, with a cocktail that looked like furniture-cream in his hand, and, with a jerk of his elbow, would say, "D. V., old chap—you know—hope she sells a million!" and would drink. Heart of gold little Upwester had, Aubrey sometimes thought. He still sometimes came home with somebody else's hat on and the visiting cards of people he didn't remember in his pocket, but it is a poor heart that never rejoices. Aubrey had lately had to buy a new hat too.

Upwester first met Delia at that party of Aubrey's with which Clough had refused to have anything to do. The party itself may be described in Upwester's words, which if he repeated once he did so twenty times.

"Now I *like* a party like that. Quiet, sensible talk, nobody one over the eight, no dressing up in pyjamas, no ragging, not to speak of, and everybody off home by half-past two! That's the stuff; makes a break! Must have another. Fresh as paint this morning—thoroughly enjoyed! But look here, my old Ticklers' jam; got a bone to pick with you! You didn't tell me there was a *real* D. V.! I don't want to butt in, but who in smoke is she? Costs a pretty penny to dress *her*, I guess! No business of mine, of course, but she's as smart a thing as I've seen in a month of Sundays. Keeps a shop, you say? So does my sister. Lingerie? Nothing like it! Wish I'd a busi-

ness head on me ! Begin to think I'm no good at cards even—lost fourteen quid to Bertie Murray this afternoon. Time I went slow for a bit ; it's Cork Street if I don't. But I did enjoy that party——”

Delia too had enjoyed the party, if one could judge from her manner the next afternoon. She snuggled up to Aubrey with a contented little sigh, playing with his buttons and tracing little patterns with her forefinger on the back of his hand.

“ It was lovely ! ” she sighed. “ I felt just a bit shy at first, but everybody was so nice ! I love Bee ! But I don't think I care for Lord Upwester much. Isn't he rather stupid ? Anyway, he's a lord, and I only keep a hat-shop. Is he very rich as well as being a lord ? ”

She played with his buttons and stroked his hand, but she still deferred her engagement to him. She had so much to think about, she said, and it wouldn't look right, so soon after his breach with Helen. He might call it an understanding if he wished, and she didn't mind wearing his ring, but it would have to be on another finger. It was a lovely ring, she said ; and so it should have been, seeing it had cost him a hundred-and-eighty guineas. Yes, he might kiss her too ; she didn't *always* want not to be kissed. . . . So he kissed her, and she closed her eyes blissfully. Later he mused on the strangeness of it, that this atomy he had found in a hat-shop, unformed and ready to tremble at a look, should so have found her way to the very core of his heart.

But more and more he worried about the possible effect of all this on his fortunes. In the days of what his critics were presently to call his "earlier manner" he had considered the public at large to be a very good judge of books, since it bought his own in large numbers—never yet had a man a stroke of good luck but his first endeavour was to persuade himself that he deserved it all and more. But the dropping of those scales from his eyes that had begun that afternoon in Pountney Place had shown him that hardly anybody knew the first single thing about books after all. He saw that famous public of his as a flock of sheep, ready to take any gate if somebody else took it first, refusing it unanimously if the leader jibbed. To buy or bribe or win over that leader was the whole business of authorship as it was practised. To that end literary journals were directed, tea-parties were held, and publishers bought newspaper-space ahead. All was a machine, in which one must either ride or be run over. And in *Delia Vane* Aubrey had challenged the machine. Some piece of grit had found its way into the wheels. That piece of grit was called Truth.

And now what was going to become of him? Any number of things were possible. His credit might be good enough to stand the strain for a time, but publishers work in figures, and the gradual letting-down of his saleability could not be long delayed. He might make a *succès de scandale*, which in the long run would not be good for his credit either, since the public does not like its slaves in two pigeon-holes at once.

Or nothing at all might happen. That book of his, his first living book, might be condoned as an escapade, on the understanding that the offence did not happen again. But he could never go back to his former manner. His editions would be a story of diminishing prices—seven-and-six, three-and-six, a shilling, Tauchnitz, and the usual odds-and-ends. Already he was within sight of the bottom of his current account. It was not a good time to sell his securities. If an idea for another book did not occur to him he must set about writing stories or newspaper articles. Or a little reviewing. He felt just about capable of a little reviewing.

XIII

“Dearest,” she said to him one night, “I should so love to go on the stage!”

They were, as it happened, in the stalls of the “Thalia” at that moment, but Aubrey knew little of what passed across the footlights. He had had a fruitless day of brain-cudgelling, and felt all-in. His tie was carelessly tied, and he would have liked nothing so much as to be at home in bed. But she was full of life and joy.

“You see,” she went on—this was during an entr’acte and her hand beneath her shawl was light and warm upon his knee—“you see, Bee’s been on the stage and knows all about it. They’ll make you a star straight away if you can put up five thousand pounds. Being a star’s as easy as falling out of bed if you’ve

got money. I *should* so love to go on the stage, Aubrey ! ”

At any other time he would have fenced, delayed, laughed the occasion off. But it was now beyond his strength. Miserably he confessed that he neither had five thousand pounds nor knew where to lay his hands on any such sum. Her eyes were sidelong on a curtained doorway with the word “EXIT” written over it in red electric lights.

“Poor darling ! ” she said ; and then, with a sudden little pressure of her hand upon his knee, “Oh, look ! Isn’t that Lord Upwester ? I’m sure he’s not seen you ! Do go and have a drink with him—I don’t mind being left alone——”

He left her, but he did not seek Upwester in the bar. Instead he stood alone in a dim crimson corridor, absently flicking the ash of his cigarette into a receptacle on the wall.

Five thousand pounds ! By the sale of everything he had he could hardly now have spared her five hundred. He didn’t doubt that all she said of the stage was true. Furs ready to step into, a waiting brougham, an expensive flat in town and a country cottage, a horse to give lumps of sugar to with a camera standing by—somebody had to occupy this glittering sphere, and it might as well be she as anybody else. Not a doubt that five thousand pounds would do the trick. But as far as Aubrey Kneller was concerned five thousand pounds might just as well have been the moon.

And if he hadn’t the cash, had he anything else to

take its place? A year or so before he might have raised money on his mere name; but not now—or at least not after the moment when his book should appear. Already he was conscious that he was going to let his publisher down; should he, while there was still time, add to his iniquity by grabbing a further sum on account, based on his former successes? He would almost have done it—for her. But wearily he turned his face to the crimson wall, burying it in his arms, careless of whether anybody saw him or not. He knew now what that book of his was. It was not a novel, but a bomb. If he had sought to challenge, not only the book-world, but the whole gravely comic convention of the world at large, *Delia Vane* could not have been more exquisitely devised for the purpose. He had betrayed, not only his publishers, but society. The naked truth in a world that only exists by means of conventions—that was what his brain had been able to conceive and his hand rash enough to write. *Delia Vane* after *Loved I Not Honour More*—it was his death-warrant. They would be quite right in putting him to death. He had set himself on a high place, merely to cast himself down again. There would soon remain to him nothing but the memory of what he had been, and that witching little sweetheart of his sitting down there in the stalls.

That night he gave her a cigarette in his flat before driving her home, and wondered moodily how he was to break these things to her. He could hardly expect her to understand them, since a few months before

he would not have understood them himself. He could only trust to her faithfulness and gratitude. Tears came into his eyes at the sight of her, curled up in his huge chair, with one small ankle pushed out towards him, and the gay lining of her cloak making a spread on the chairback behind her. Dear God, if he should lose her now ! It was in his heart never to let her out of his flat again. And to think that she smiled, knowing nothing of the agony that surged in his breast ! She was smiling at the orange-hued cylinders of his electric fire. She seemed to him to be already on the stage, bowing behind a forest of bouquets, courted, photographed, adored, her name on everybody's lips. And had it been in his power she should have had it all for one of those kisses she knew how to give.

Then she moved. " I suppose it can't be done," she sighed.

He did not even ask her what it was that could not be done.

He discharged his taxi at her door in Pountney Place, and set out to walk to King Street, St. James's. He passed shelterless, outcast people, and felt himself more outcast than they. He began to count his steps. *Left foot, right foot* : with every step he took there ran a dual set of pictures in his brain. They ran, as it were, in harness, the actual facts of the world's life, the no less actual facts of that other life that no man knows but himself. *Left foot, right foot* : the Annie Thompson who had crept into his book, the Delia

Vane who had crept into his heart. *Left foot, right foot*: exit Rosamond, good-bye Helen. *Left foot, right foot*: Upwester and Pat——

Suddenly a cold sweat broke out on Aubrey Kneller's brow. Upwester and Pat! He was passing the doors of the New Universities Club; he sat suddenly down on the Club's steps. Upwester! No, impossible! Though Delia had married Pat in the book, *that* parallel at least could not be carried over into real life! Upwester would *never* come between Aubrey and this other Delia of his desire! He was a decent little fellow, played the game. Why, he had had drinks with Aubrey, introduced him to his club, invited him to his flat. Nobody did these things and then let a pal down. Upwester was, must be, all right!

Yes, but what about *her*? Could he trust *her* a yard? Utterly as he loved her he knew he could not. Between his first gift of a hat and this last demand for five thousand pounds there had been wile after wile, stratagem after stratagem. She had pouted and wept and flared up; she had promised and broken her promise; she would marry him and she would not marry him; a dog was not to be hanged on her word. Therefore, however loyal *his* intentions, what chance would Upwester have if *she* decided to set her cap at *him*? Why had she said when she had first met him that she didn't think she liked him very much? Why had she said that she would go to him for money for her business? Why had her eyes spied him so quickly at the theatre? Because she was a liar, and he loved

her. She was a selfish, heartless little schemer, and he loved her. And Upwester would not even have to furnish the five thousand pounds. His title was enough. Lady Upwester was already a star without lifting a finger. And Aubrey could do nothing, nothing, nothing. He could only sit on the steps of the New Universities Club and rock slowly from side to side with his head between his hands.

The next day but one the proofs of his book arrived. Except to correct a few trifling literal errors he barely glanced at them ; why read a book that is as inalienably one's own life as the blood that comes and goes from one's heart ? Let the proofs go. Half a morning sufficed to despatch them. He registered the packet at the Post Office near St. James's church and put his receipt into his pocket.

But that perforated piece of paper was not a receipt for the parcel. It was a receipt for the body and brain and immortal soul of a man.

XIV

Not very long after that Aubrey found it necessary to run down to Rickmansworth on business connected with the house he no longer required. He asked Delia to go with him, but she said that she could not leave Pountney Place. He wondered a little at this, as she now had an assistant, but if she couldn't she couldn't, and there was an end of it. He went alone, telling her that he would be back in time to take her out to dinner.

His business was done more quickly than he expected. He was back in King Street again before five o'clock. As he waited on the ground floor for the descending lift, down it came, and Upwester and Delia stepped out of it.

She greeted him with an undisturbed smile, and, with her first words back came his own chickens to roost. For, just as he had formerly pretended to Helen that he had thought an appointment was for half-past four instead of four, so she now said that she had understood him to say he would be back at five. And, anyway, wasn't he back at five? So she had called for him at his flat, and had found all locked up, and just as she had turned away again Lord Upwester had come out of his own door. He knew that it was a tissue of lies from beginning to end; he knew that she knew that he saw through it; but there was nothing to be said. Upwester looked guilty. The three of them walked together as far as the Carlton, and there Upwester left them. Aubrey and Delia descended to the tea-room.

He was silent, but she made up for his taciturnity. Never had her eyes been so active nor her spirits so high. She rallied him on his gloominess, and gave a delighted little laugh at his sudden start when she slyly placed a hot teaspoon on the back of his hand. She adored the Carlton, she said, and wasn't that Gladys Cooper sitting with the good-looking man over there? He roused himself a little, but relapsed again. A great dread possessed him. He drank tea, but could not have swallowed a crumb. She *had* met Upwester

by appointment, *was* turning him round her finger, and he *was* going to lose her.

"It is Gladys Cooper!" she rippled. "Aubrey, darling, if I do go on the stage will you write me a play?"

He said that he couldn't write a play. He didn't think he should ever write anything again.

"Oh, that's only because you're a little tired, darling! Do write me a play, Aubrey, with a large fat part all to myself!"

"Oh, marry me, marry me!" broke in a low groan from him.

"Silly boy, what's the matter with you?" she asked, innocently. "I can't marry you this minute, can I?"

"Do you love me, *do* you love me?"

"Of course I do. I think you're a perfect duck. You aren't cross with me about anything, are you?"

"Oh, I feel like water!"

"I know," she sympathised. "I always used to feel like that. I felt like that when you came into the shop that time. It's a horrid feeling."

"Marry me to-morrow—the next day—say you will——"

"But there won't be time, darling! I shall have all my things to get! I should hate to get married in a poky sort of way!"

"I'd marry you if you hadn't a penny."

"Aubrey," she said slowly, "don't you trust me?"

He dared go no further on that dangerous ground. That night he met Upwester at the club. The peer's

hangdog look completely gave him away. Returning home, he tossed all that night in a rage of jealousy. In his thoughts he alternately took Upwester by the throat, threatened him, implored him, laid machiavelian traps for him. He would have them both watched, would watch them himself, until he could account for every moment of their day. He tortured himself with images of their clandestine meeting that afternoon. And from loving Delia he turned to hate of her. He called her vile names. She was a treacherous, cold-blooded, unscrupulous little harpy. She had no intention of marrying him. She was holding out for the highest bid. He had clothed her, fed her, taken her about, loaded her with gifts, financed her business. All was not enough, but she must have five thousand pounds more and a play all about her heartless little self. Let her not try him too far ! There was a limit ! Flesh and blood could only stand a certain amount——

So he tossed, turning his dreadful new gift of vision into a fiendish instrument with which to torture himself. Sinister gift, that will not let us look on love but we must gaze on hate too ! He had better have married Helen. Infinitely happier had he never adventured beyond the easy falsities of life. That was the grief to which he came. He had come, just for once, into contact with knowledge, and saw his ruinous end rushing to meet him. The publication of *Delia Vane* overshadowed him like an imminent doom. For a year or two he would scrape along somehow. Oddments of money would still trickle in. He could com-

pound on his life-insurance policy. His past services to literature might bring him within the terms of the Royal Literary Fund. He supposed he would always have the clothes he stood up in. But for the rest, all the profit of his life would be the peace and bitterness of truth.

XV

His book appeared in September. Bold pronouncements in the book-columns of the newspapers heralded its appearance, the framed posters in the tube lifts proclaimed it. He had his cheque in advance and on account, and it rather more than sufficed to sit him straight again at the bank. His first reviews came to hand. They were brief and colourless. A large edition had been subscribed ; all was in readiness for an immediate reprinting. And then, suddenly, nothing whatever happened. Quietly, undramatically, nothing at all happened. It was as if *Delia Vane* was being secretly and silently burked. Openly assassinated it could not be. People could not be prevented from asking for the latest work of the author of *Loved I Not Honour More*. And no doubt they did ask. But Aubrey never heard of it.

A week passed, and a fortnight. Papers that might have been expected to review him still delayed to do so. One paper indeed, highbrow and obscure, did attack him violently. It rated the book as a grotesque travesty of life, and said that Mr. Kneller's acquaintance among the baronetage could be but small if he

thought that such a figure as Sir Patrick Archdale existed outside his own delirious imagination. It strongly recommended him to return to the manner of those spotless ones, Sir Vernon and Sir Hugh.

And that was all. *Delia Vane* simply did not catch on. Nobody understood it or cared a hang about it. Its announcements disappeared from the booksellers' windows, other posters replaced it in the tubes. The trade gave it a perfunctory display, and then relegated it to the back parts of the shops. His publishers wrote to him complaining that they could not conceive what had happened. Then apparently it occurred to somebody in the office to read the book itself. Aubrey received a peremptory telephone-message telling him he must call at once. He did so, and there was the devil of a row.

Hitherto (they told him) they had accepted his books in good faith. He had supplied a saleable article, had built up a magnificent public, and their relations had been of the happiest. But—they must tell Mr. Kneller this plainly—had they known beforehand the character of the work he had now foisted on them, like some stinging creature in a posy of flowers, they would never have dreamed of affixing their imprint to it. They could not imagine what had possessed him. And at the word "possessed" Aubrey started a little. It was so very near the truth.

"But hang it all," he broke out, "what else do you want? Of course a fellow must be possessed by his book! How the devil can *he* possess *it*?"

"Those are technicalities with which we have nothing to do, Mr. Kneller. We don't write the book. And it's hardly too much to say that you've let us down grossly and that we have a very heavy load left on our hands."

"But damn it all, man," Aubrey had exploded, "the book's worth all the others put together! No, it isn't even that—it's in a class by itself!"

"So are its sales, Mr. Kneller. That's exactly what we're complaining of."

"Start the advertising again. Surely the public aren't all fools! I tell you there's the stuff of life in that book!"

"We've read it," was the dry reply.

"Where's a copy? Let me show you!"

"It's no good, Mr. Kneller. Your other books were a faithful and charming picture, the mirror held up to nature, but this——"

Aubrey broke into a wild laugh.

"The mirror held up to nature! Are you serious? *Haw, haw, haw!* Sorry to laugh—*haw, haw, haw!*—but it's too comic! *Haw, haw, haw, haw!* Don't mind me, but you see I happen to know Archdale—he's really a fellow called Upwester! And I happen to know Delia too—her real name's Marie! And as for those tailor's-dummies you want me to put in, why, I had 'em in, and I turfed them out again! Where do you suppose books come from? Out of a machine, like a gross of cut nails? I tell you they get born, like a woman with a baby, and all you confounded publishers have to do

is to tie the knot and let 'em run about on their own ! ”

“ Well, Mr. Kneller, you're entitled to your views, but as this is the last book of your contract you can hardly expect us to renew.”

“ Renew ! ” cried Aubrey excitedly. “ Do you think I'd *let* you renew ? Do you think I've been through what I have been through for you to hawk my stuff on your coster's barrow ? No, sir ! You go on publishing as you call it ; life and I'll attend to our end of the show ! I know what I know, and I laugh at you ! My soul's my own—‘ HAW, HAW, HAW, HAW. HAW ! ’ ”

And with a wave of his hand he strode out of the office and down the stairs.

He strode straight on to Pountney Place, laughing loudly as he went. Free, free ! Or at least he would be free within half an hour from now. For did he not see with translucent clearness what was going to happen ? Did he not know, as if it had been shouted in his ears, what Delia was going to tell him ! And did he now care the snap of a finger ? Not he ! Let her marry her peer ! He wasn't a bad sort after all. And she, steeped to her lips in smiling deceit, was a born actress. As Lady Upwester she would probably set the London stage on fire. And Aubrey would go to her *debut*. He would see her from the gallery, join in the acclamations, shout himself hoarse at her triumph. Marry her now ? He didn't want to marry her ! Some union more mystic even than that of marriage was

between her and him. She was Delia Vane, who had given him, not a few kisses, but this boundless liberty with which he could now move through the world. She was his door, not into a house in Rickmansworth, not into a flat in St. James's, not into a parlour in Pountney Place, but into the heart of life itself ! Know yourself, one other person, and the relation between the two, and you have a base-line from which to find the range of anything there is ; and did not Aubrey know himself, her, and that relation ? Was she not his very Muse ? Had she not given him the note of harmonies that would be music in his soul for ever ? Oh, she had, she had, and he must run and thank her !

He turned into Pountney Place. Behind him, past Harrods' and the Oratory, swept the double main stream of life, east and west, west and east, without ceasing. He walked as if on air, laughing for joy as he went. What a quaint, quakerish, demure little street it was, with its windows so oddly half-commercial and half-domestic ! The very furniture in the windows of its antique shops seemed to have turned its back on the interiors only for a moment, and would turn round again when it saw that there was nobody outside to look at but Aubrey Kneller ! Striped sunblinds, flowers in window-boxes, fanlights, quiet o'd Hogarth frontages—a novelist might find suggestions in a street like that ! That little shop across the way, for example : it had a little whitewashed area, a green-and-white sunblind with the name

MATHILDE

in flowing script across it, and a serried row of chimney-cowls making ragged the skyline over its coping. On a pedestal in the window stood a single green-and-white hat. He had a fancy he would look at that hat. He had no particular reason for doing so ; he just thought he would. He crossed the street. The front door of the shop stood open, but a door just within it on the right was closed. Under a little brass plate that bore the words " Please Ring " was an electric button. But Aubrey had no intention of ringing. He hadn't the price of a hat such as that in his pocket. Yet he lingered, not passing the shop immediately.

As he lingered, he faintly heard, from somewhere at the back of the premises, and apparently upstairs, a woman's voice that called some apprentice or junior assistant :

" *Marie-e-e-e!* " the voice died away on the air.

THE WOMAN IN THE WAY

V

THE WOMAN IN THE WAY

NOTE:—There lived in England, in the middle of the Seventeenth Century, a man called Ruddle, a parson by calling, who wrote down on paper that he saw, with his own eyes, the things here described, and did not add that he considered it high time he prepared to take his leave of the world. All I know of this Reverend Mr. Ruddle is to be found in the *History of the Princes, Lords Marcher, etc. of Powys Fadog*, by Mr. Hughes of Clochfaen (London, Richards, 1881). Vol. I, pp. 246 et seq. The passages here printed in italics are precisely as Mr. Ruddle wrote them. The rest is my own. Mr. Ruddle begins :

I

In the beginning of the year 1665 a disease happened in this town of Launceston and some of my scholars died of it. Among others who fell under its malignity was John Elliott, the eldest son of Edward Elliott, of Treberse, Esq., a stripling of about sixteen years of age, but of uncommon parts and ingenuity. At his own particular request I preached at the funeral, which happened on the 20th day of June. In my discourse I spoke some words in commendation of the young gentleman, such as might endear his memory to those who knew him, and withal tend to preserve his example to those who went to school with him

and were to continue after him. An ancient gentleman who was then in the church was much affected with the discourse, and often heard to repeat one expression I then used out of Virgil: "Et puer ipse fuit cantari dignus."

Mr. Ruddle then goes on to tell us that no sooner was the service over than he was accosted at the church-door by the ancient gentleman just mentioned (on whom he had never before set eyes in his life), who, with unusual importunity, begged the minister to come with him to his house and stay the night. The request could hardly be granted, as the parson considered himself to be bound to the bereaved parents for the remainder of the day. Accordingly he "rescued himself" from the old gentleman's kindness—for the invitation had been courteously expressed.

But the would-be host persisted; and this is the first of a series of pictures Mr. Ruddle gives us that need but a touch to make them glow—the group of the Elliotts and their friends at the church-door, the dead boy's fellow-students, the ring of less-directly interested spectators, and, in the middle of it, the parson, button-holed by an importunate stranger almost before the bell had ceased to toll. We can imagine the parson as saying, as he extricated himself, that this was no moment for intrusion. Nor would he even promise to go on the following day.

"Then at least, sir, give me your promise that you will come on the day after that," the old gentleman urged, in some such words.

Whereupon the parson asked the nature of this business that could brook so little delay.

But even this was evaded. The other only begged him over and over again to come, while none was more puzzled than the parson himself "to know whence this sudden flush of friendship should arise."

But in the end he gave way. He promised to pay his visit on the next day but one, and the old gentleman, with profuse thanks, bowed and departed.

But this was only a beginning. Apparently Mr. Ruddle stayed in the Elliotts' house that night, for it was there, on the very next day, that a messenger from the same old gentleman sought him out and begged him to come forthwith. The distance that the messenger had travelled could have been no very great one, for, on Mr. Ruddle's bluntly refusing, he was back again, if you will believe it, in the afternoon. It was surely pardonable in the parson that by this time he showed a flash of temper.

"Tell your master," he charged the servant, "that it does not suit with my convenience, and if that does not content him, and he will still give no reason why I should visit him, then I will not come at all."

However, he finally went, as originally arranged; and in view of all this urgency he must have been more than a little astonished to find himself received, not by his host, nor by any member of his family, but by a second clergyman, who had very little the air of being there by accident. Parson Ruddle does not hide his impression that the stage had been carefully set, and

it was, in fact, from this brother of the coat that he had the first inkling of why he had been summoned.

First (says Mr. Ruddell) he began to inform me of the infelicity of the family in general, and then gave instance of the youngest son. He related what a hopeful sprightly lad he lately was, and how melancholick and sottish he was now grown. Saith he, "The poor boy believes himself to be haunted with ghosts, and is confident that he meets with an evil spirit in a certain field about half a mile from this place, as often as he goes that way to school."

At which point, and "as observing their cue most exactly," up at last came the old gentleman and his lady, and made haste to confirm all that had been said.

But apparently they did not do this to Mr. Ruddell's entire satisfaction, if we are right in reading a certain reserve into his next words.

It was the main drift of all these three to persuade me that either the boy was lazy, and glad of an excuse to keep from the school, or that he had a fetch upon his father to get money and new clothes, that he might range to London after a brother he had there.

And this strikes one as a sensible view. The parents will have none of this ghost-seeing, and neither will we. In fact we should have expected Mr. Ruddell, who so far has seemed a level-headed man and skilled in the ways of boys withal, to be of the same opinion.

But not so. He found the thing "strange but not incredible," and for a moment we wonder whether we have not been mistaken in him after all.

However, the obvious thing to do in the circumstances was to see the boy himself. As part of the invitation these people had forced on him, Mr. Ruddle was staying the night in the house. Perhaps he was a little tired, perhaps he had found a little more than met the eye in the peculiar manner of his reception. However it was, he proposed to put off seeing the boy until the following morning.

But here he "perceived another spring that their courtesy had laid for him." The "spring" must have been more in the manner than the words, for it was surely not unnatural that the mother should want no more delay. The three men, two of them parsons and the third the old gentleman, had been talking a little apart. Suddenly the mother stepped forward to them, with the request that the boy should be seen there and then.

So, drawing off from the company to an orchard hard by, she went herself, and brought him to me, and left him with me.

We are given the actual date of this interview. It was the twenty-second day of June, in the late afternoon or early evening. And it gives us a curious sense of the nearness of all these events that we have even authority for the weather—the extraordinary heat and dryness of the day that was closing, the sultry stillness of the air, so that chimney-smoke rose straight up, the low flashes of summer lightning, the mutterings of thunder. The fruit would be forming in that Cornish orchard, and the last of the browning petals would

sprinkle the grass underfoot. As these were evidently people of some substance, it is no far flight of fancy to add a fruit-wall or so, gardens with walks between the parched flowers, and the sun either behind the gables of the house or flashing on their windows like gold. In spite of the two-and-a-half centuries that lie like a dark glass in between, these things still show faint but true through Parson Ruddle's tale.

And so, walking up and down that orchard, he and the boy had what nowadays would be called their psycho-analytic talk together.

He instantly discovered that it "needed no policy to screw himself into the youth's heart." Quite the other way.

He most openly, and with all obliging candour, did aver that he loved his book and desired nothing more than to be bred a scholar: that he had not the least respect for any of womankind, as his mother gave out: and that the only request he would make to his parents was that they would but believe his constant assertions concerning the woman he was disturbed with in the field called the Higher Broom Quartils. He told me, with all naked freedom and a flood of tears, that if any man (making a bow to me) would but go with him to the place, he might be convinced that the thing was real.

And then this, with the totally unexpected shock of its concluding words:

This woman which appears to me (said he) lived a neighbour here to my father, and died about eight years since. Her name was Dorothy Dingley. She never

speaks to me : but passeth by hastily, and always leaves the footpath to me, and she commonly meets me——

—this is the shocking thing——

—she commonly meets me twice or three times in the length of the field.

II

At what may be called the sheer mechanical novelty of the encounter—not to go any further—one puts down the Reverend Mr. Ruddle's record at this point and tries to collect one's thoughts. The ingenious cruelty of the idea makes us catch our breath. Of course we do not believe a word of it. It is merely something that the boy told Mr. Ruddle, who passes it on at his own risk. He takes no responsibility except that of a tale-bearer, and to find him a mere carrier of gossip is a little disappointing after our first impression of him. In the meantime, we are merely asked to believe that, in a certain part of the county of Cornwall, at intervals between the June of 1664 and the June of the following year, the factor of space was annihilated, and something existed in a place that was already naturally and normally occupied.

And the factor of time went too ; for if, as this boy said, the hallucination happened to him two or three times in the length of a field, why not oftener ? Why not at every step he took ? Why not a running stream of apparitions, so continuous that this woman-shape did not “ appear ” at all, but was merely permanently there, constant in its ubiquity ?

It appeared that the boy himself had a hazy sort of recollection of the person of this Dorothy Dingley. "Though the shape of the face was in my memory, yet I could not recall the name of the person, but did suppose it was some woman who lived thereabout, and had frequent occasion that way." This, at any rate, we unreservedly believe, for it is of the very texture of our young memories. The boy was about eight years old when Mistress Dingley died. Ask a boy of eight what is his earliest memory and you will get an answer of sorts. But ask him the same question at sixteen and already he is at a loss. He will not so much remember as re-echo his former statement. It is not at all surprising that this boy should remember only tardily that the woman whose shape he saw was dead. The word "dead" conveyed nothing to him. So at first he had no fear. He saw so little to be afraid of that he often spoke to this woman whose business brought her so frequently that way. It was only slightly disconcerting that he never had any reply.

But the first day of fear was rapidly approaching. This day must have been the very first day when she met him, not once, but twice. *That* must have been fear to demonstration, and with the shock of it there must have vanished all possibility of this wayfarer being an ordinary woman. And in his fear he changed his way to school, "taking the under horse-road, and then she always met me in the narrow lane, between the quarry park and the nursery, which——" we read it in its unstressed simplicity, "—'which was worse.'"

Evidently, then, her business was with the boy himself, and was not confined to the field that lay between his home and his school.

All this, he told the parson, had been going on for a year. No need to dwell on the increasingly familiar daily dread of those twelve months. Enough that from a merry sprightly lad he had become sottish and melancholick.

I prayed continually that God would either free me from it, or let me know the meaning of it. Night and day, sleeping and waking, the shape was ever running in my mind, and I often did repeat these places in Scripture (with which he took a small Bible out of his pocket) : "Thou scarest me with dreams and terrifiest me through visions" : and "In the morning thou shalt say, Would God it were evening, and at evening thou shalt say, Would God it were morning, for the fear of thine heart wherewith thou shalt fear and for the sight of thine eyes which thou shalt see."

And when at last the whole thing came out, it was not the boy himself who told his parents. Besides the brother who had ranged to London, there was a middle brother, who, we note in passing, is the only member of the family Mr. Ruddle sees fit to name. We fasten on it, as it were, that this lad's name was William. Boy-like, the unhappy youth told his trouble first to brother William. And brother William told his father and mother.

Already we can guess which of these it was who wore the breeches in that troubled house. It was the mother

who had fetched the boy from the orchard, insisting that Parson Ruddle should see him at once. It was the mother, we may be sure, who, hearing that a man so understanding with boys was in the neighbourhood, had despatched her ancient husband to young Elliott's funeral, with orders to bring this Mr. Ruddle back. Her command had lain behind the old gentleman's almost unmannerly importunity, she had scolded him when he had returned with no parson by his side. She, and surely nobody else, had sent off the messenger who had twice pestered the parson while he was still in the Elliotts' house. And since she had a son of school age, she was presumably a good deal younger than her Latin-mumbling spouse. Disingenuousness and reluctance and reserve had characterised Parson Ruddle's reception. Putting two and two together, does it not seem likely that what the mother was manœuvring for was this—to get all the help the parson could give her, but to give him as little information as possible in return? A secretive lady, one would say, who liked to keep things in her own hands. A managing lady, who ordered her husband about and wanted things done there and then. An anxious lady, the mother of one son who had ranged to London with new clothes on his back and money in the pockets of them, and of another who showed signs of following in his footsteps. But a lady, above all, at her wits' end what to do, since she sent for parsons with one breath and with the next sharply charged her son with malingering and bade him be off to school. And to school he went.

"But always," says the unhappy lad, *"I met the Woman in the Way."*

The talk between the parson and the boy lasted for close on two hours. At the end of it Mr. Ruddle had definitely taken sides. He confesses that on his return to the house he was short with the parents. He tells us that the mother, "whose inquisitiveness had missed us," wanted to speak to him. He "gave her a convenience"—he could hardly do less—but it is noteworthy that he said not one word about the agreement to which he and the boy had come; which was, that they should go together to these uneasy Quartils at six o'clock of the following morning, to see, if they could, this presence that certainly had no business to be there.

III

Mr. Ruddle is presently about to make a number of tremendous assertions. Let us, before he does so, clear the ground a little for him. After that he is more than welcome to have it to himself.

He was going with the boy to inquire into the alleged comings and goings of somebody he had never known. The boy's own recollections in the matter were vague and confused. But the parents had been well acquainted with the original of this troublesome thing. She was spoken of as a neighbour, they had attended her funeral. So she can hardly have been a simple dairymaid or the daughter of a Cornish hind. She must have been a person of at least respectable degree, and not impossibly of some minor consideration and standing.

She had died eight years before, when the boy who was now sixteen had been eight years old.

And, now that he was sixteen, she seemed to have singled him out for her undesired companionship. Had she troubled other boys of the neighbourhood it would quickly have become notorious. The middle brother, William, was left in peace. And a'ready we wonder whether we ought even to wonder what her motive was. Already we scent a warning in the air—and have half a mind to drop the curtain on this obscure family history of so long ago. But even as we hesitate a new actor seems to step on the scene. He is the elder brother who has ranged away to London.

A disease had happened in Launceston—they are Mr. Ruddle's opening words—of which some of his scholars had died. So quietly, so naturally has the story begun that for the moment it did not occur to us that this was the year of the Plague. Nor, for that matter, is it to be found in the records that Launceston, so far away, was one of the places from which the fugitives from London were driven back at the pitchfork's point. But everywhere terror and foreboding stalked up and down the land, and war was awake upon the seas. Ways were foul, communications bad, home best. Add to this that London, youth, money and new clothes were very much the same then that they are to-day. Few and far between must have been the letters that that Cornish mother received from her prodigal in the afflicted city. He might have been dead for months and she none the wiser.

Nor do sons become prodigals all in a moment. Sad mothers see it coming. There were innocent rustic junketings in Cornwall as elsewhere, but there were also pleasures less innocent. And what can a mother do when she sees her son, on the verge of manhood, wearying of his surroundings and fretting to range away? She will pray, supplicate, try to stay him with her arms. All that is past shall be forgotten so he will but remain with her. She will exhaust herself that his father's house shall be a pleasant place for him, and will look about among the neighbouring families of standing in search of a girl of her own choosing, whose arms may keep him where her own have failed. Mothers were so, are so, and will always be so.

Therefore let us picture a similar situation to-day. Let us suppose that, to-day, a mother sought a desirable wife for her restless son—but found the the young man had already contracted a less desirable infatuation of his own. And say that all had begun innocently enough, and that half the danger lay in the mother's own apprehension. And say that this undesired young woman happened to be of such a condition that she could not well be denied the house merely because she was disliked. Do we not instantly see what would happen? Can we not picture how smilingly the bidden but unwelcome guest would sit at the board, yet how secretly armed, as if with a steel shirt under her smock? Can we not see how, under her demure looks, she would hungrily wait for the slightest occasion of offence? Would not every word be given its particular construc-

tion and every glance be wrested to a private meaning ? We not only see ; we almost hear the indignant words shaping themselves in her breast. Not good enough for their spark of a son, she ! (“ Yes, madam ; I thank you, madam ! ”) Permitted the house, but as something between the servants and themselves ! (“ No, madam ; indeed you are too kind, madam ! ”) How long would such a situation continue ? Not long. Something would presently happen. The visits to the house would cease. Clandestine meetings would take their place. This, too, would come to the ears of the mother. The fat would be in the fire, would flare. The young woman would march down the path with angry words in her ears and her heart already seething with schemes of revenge. This is what would happen to-day, and even in two-hundred-and-fifty years the ways of the heart in love and hate do not greatly change.

Assume, then,—for it commits us to no conclusion from which we cannot withdraw at any moment—that Dorothy Dingley had been such an one. Suppose her to have been of intermediate condition, with goods enough to keep her in idleness and no more, come into her small property too young, grown up to do as she pleased with none to check her. No need to say that she was ill-intentioned or ill-conditioned. The sense of grievance under which she laboured might have been a perfectly legitimate one. She need not even have been greatly drawn to their son. For all that—hoighty-toity ! It was not as if she herself was going a-begging !

Far from it ! There were young farmers in plenty to whom her middling fortune would be riches undreamed-of ! She could have her pick of a dozen of them !

So, misjudged and injured, would not such a young woman be willing, as the saying is, to give these people something to talk about ? Can we not hear her scoffing laugh ? *They*, to set themselves up ! *That* woman, with her pottering old dotard of a husband ! Much joy of love *she* had had, to marry for an orchard or so and a few gables ! Let her take care—others were as good as she, and with blood in their veins too ! Her son ? That young cock with his hackle up ? She wouldn't have wasted a look on him except to anger that old-man's-nurse, his mother ! A turn of the head would fetch him—a glance and she could have him at her feet——

So it may have been—or it may not. She may have been one who should have been stripped and flogged at the cart's-tail amid the execrations of every mother of growing sons thereabouts—or she may not. She may have run from him, been caught and kissed, struggled and broken free again—or not. She may have given him the ribbon from her breast or the garter from her knee, and laughed at him and called him boy the more he tried to show himself a man—or none of these things may be true. But if she did not some other woman did, in 1665 as to-day. We do not know whether the youth went off to London flushed with success or in dudgeon and despite. We do not know whether the Plague took or spared him. We do not

know of what illness Dorothy Dingley herself died. We only know that the bell had tolled for her as her mortal remains had been lowered into the grave, and that now, eight years later, or seven, if we reckon off the year it had lasted, something of her that was *not* dead met a younger brother in the Way.

Let Parson Ruddle now speak again.

IV

Before five o'clock in the morning the lad was in my chamber, and very brisk. I arose and went with him. The field he led me to I guessed to be about twenty acres, in an open country and about three furlongs from the house. We went into the field, and had not gone above a third part before the spectrum, in the shape of a woman, with all the circumstances he had described her to me in the orchard the day before (as much as the suddenness of its appearance and evanition would permit me to discover) met us and passed us by. I was a little surprised at it and though I had taken up a firm resolution to speak to it yet I had not the power, nor indeed durst I look back, yet I took care not to show my fear to my pupil and guide: and therefore telling him that I was satisfied in the truth of his complaint, we walked to the end of the field and returned, nor did the ghost meet us at that time more than once.

With these words Parson Ruddle burns his boats. He can no longer shelter behind the boy's account. He has seen for himself, takes the whole thing on his own shoulders, and we know exactly where we are.

If we now meet with lies, they are his lies and not the lad's.

And, after the first instinctive gesture of fear, he was merely "a little surprised." You or I might marvel that grass and common yellow broom should grow in that dreadful place at all. We might stand in amazement that honeysuckle and roses should dare to flower in the hedges of that awful sunken lane. But apparently the whole landscape could rock horrifically before this parson's eyes, and, barring a natural shiver, he was merely "a little surprised." Perhaps the terrific implication of it all sank in later. . . .

And now comes a break in the narrative. Word was brought to Mr. Ruddle that urgent private affairs demanded his presence elsewhere. He left, promising to be back in a week's time. This promise he was unable to keep, for his wife was taken ill. It is the first we hear that he had a wife. We have already made up our minds that Mrs. Ruddle had a very remarkable husband.

However (he says) my mind was upon the adventure ; I studied the case ; and about three weeks after that went again, resolving, by the help of God, to see the utmost.

By this time the boy would be almost blithe again. He had found a sympathetic friend, able to help and returning presently. But heavy care weighed on that anxious, close-lipped woman, his mother. For the parson said not a word to her or her spouse of what he had seen. All that she knew was that her boy, who a year before had gone gaily singing about the house

was a mere shadow of his former self. And he was now sixteen, which is the turn and change in a boy's life. In love with some wench? Not unlikely; but with which wench? The neighbourhood was not so populous that he could keep such a secret for long. True, he denied it, but what boy would not? So once more the same thing would happen that we might expect to-day. She would watch his comings and goings. She would ask him questions of which the drift did not appear. She would lay little traps for him, would send him on errands in order that she might discover in which quarters he lingered unusually long. Names would be slyly introduced in his presence, bits of gossip repeated to see whether he changed countenance. In a word, the history of the prodigal eldest brother would be enacted all over again.

Then one day the boy, who had never swerved from his story of what happened to him in the field, would let fall some little detail at which the mother would prick up her ears. One sees her turn suddenly pale. Of *what* appearance did he say this woman was who met him? *What* shape of face? *What* colour of brows? *How* tall! Of *what* carriage?

And then would come the sickening hour when it appeared that the boy's description corresponded exactly with that of the woman who had already stepped between her and one of her sons.

It is of course all supposing: nothing on earth but supposing. But it is supposing in terms of known reality. Women have been known to transfer their

favours from one brother to another. But when in the history of the world before did one do so from the grave? And when did one so diabolically bide her time, waiting as it were for the ripe moment when her victim did not know what ailed him, but only that women were disturbingly different from anything he had supposed? Up to that point evil influences had been powerless against his innocence. It may be that this influence had had no choice but to wait for those seven years. But the seven years were at an end, and—lo! The hour at last! Gently, then, at first, not to frighten the quarry! Give place to him—remember that *he* comes from a house with gables and orchards, while *you* are of inferior condition! Do not answer him if he speaks, Dorothy Dingley—remember that your voice is not quite what an ordinary woman's voice should be, for it is no perfected piece of work, but only a flimsy figure, the making of which you have busied yourself about for so long! And above all, be wary about that first time you meet him, not once, but twice again after that! He might shy at *that*! For he is of a different make from that ruffling blade of a brother of his! That one was only too ready to be drinking and cockfighting and wenching; but this is a pious, studious lad, with a quick and timid fancy for you to play on! Play on it, then, and be evens with that hated woman with the nodding old husband! She thought she could treat you thus and thus, did she? She had come to your funeral with weeds upon her body but triumph and joy in her heart? She had

thought she had heard the last of you when the bell clanged out its note? Indeed no! You knew a trick worth two of that, Dorothy Dingley! Never mind the middle boy, young William! First the firstborn, then the youngest, will serve your turn! *She* to set herself up? Ha, ha! Let her wait a bit—let her wait a bit——

For how can one more surely pierce a mother's heart than by means of the last son she will bear?

If these things were true—but *only* if they were true—then neither Plague nor Fire was the remarkablest thing that happened in England in those years.

V

Mr. Ruddle came back on the 27th day of July, five weeks within a day after the funeral of young Elliott of Treberse. And whatever those "studies" of his in the meantime had been, his mind was now made up. He had had enough of these people who first called him in and then kept things back from him. He had had enough of the second parson too, supposing (as is likely) that he also had known this Mistress Dingley and so was in the plot. This time he was going to the Quartils alone. In fact the very next morning found him there.

But the enterprise was in part a failure. It proved one thing, however, namely, that the thing could show itself in the boy's absence. Says the parson:

The spectre appeared much about the same place as before, about ten feet distant on my right hand. But this

time it moved more quickly, inasmuch as I had no time to speak to it, as I had determined with myself beforehand.

And then at last the parson decided to take the parents into consultation. He did so that very night, proposing that they should all visit the unclean field together on the morrow. He did so as they sat by candlelight round the board—or it may have been as they took the evening air in the porch—or perhaps it was as they paced the flagged paths, with the hush of the violet evening about them and the large moon (for it was late in the month) beginning to look over the hill. If the other parson (who somehow strikes one as a bit of a shuffler) was there he was not included in the invitation, or else was unable to accept it, for he did not make one of the party. They talked far into the night—or maybe for a short time only. They went to bed to sleep—or perhaps to toss restlessly until the first signs of dawn. All was thus, or thus, or after some other fashion. And it is noticeable that from this point on Mr. Ruddle becomes increasingly reticent about the whole affair.

And yet so charged with import are the few things he does allow to pass him, and so actinically do they project themselves down to our own day, that they kindle as it were glimmers for a little way about them in the surrounding darkness, so that we feel sure of just a little more than we have actual warrant for. And as presently we shall have to refrain altogether from guessing, we will make the most of our time.

First, then, Mr. Ruddle, who had twice seen this

Mistress Dingley's shape, does not mention whether she had or had not beauty. This is understandable. Seeing the action he was about to take, earthly considerations such as these would be far from his mind. Indeed beauty would be a positive discommendation in his eyes, as one snare the more to tangle the wayward foot and the erring eye. So he would be silent about it.

Next, neither does the boy say that she was hideous, which he would certainly have done had she had the appearance of a bogey. In the beginning at any rate he was not afraid of her good-morning. So may not a measure of good looks, whether of a malignant cast or otherwise, be taken as not impossible?

Again, supposing that prodigal in London had been the mere slave of a petticoat: were there not dairymaids and village wenches enough for the lifting up of such a young squire's finger? And if the beauty be not denied, would it not be a somewhat different beauty from that of these rustic rivals who milked and churned and scoured the pans? A paler, more harmonious beauty, menacing or benign, with the slender hand going bail for the whole lovely arm, and the foot for the hidden rest? Or deny the beauty altogether: does not one daily see *unbeautiful* women who do not lack other gifts—the parleying eye, the displayed breast, the gait that bids follow? Dare we give these attributes to this being who, though dead, was not at rest? Singular in that, what other dreadful uniqueness might she not possess? Dead and yet not dead—dead as it were with one eye open, vigilant

and baleful—lurking where two worlds met, rejected in some part of her body by the one and unaccepted in her spirit by the other——

So what awful ambiguity have we here? When have we heard of these pestilent creatures before? What ancient unhallowed legends break in upon us that we had supposed to belong to the limbo of things blessedly lost? Who was this Lilith, pale predecessor of Eve—of sweetest Eve, man's proper mate, who interposed between Adam and this wickedness, thrusting it out into the voids of the upper air? Who and what were those others, those Lamiae, so inimical to the race of man that to destroy it in its innocent beginnings was their delight? Who and what were those other lean and hungry shapes, of devil-women and succubi, of vampires and sirens and draggers-down of the bodies and souls of men? Was the year 1665 *not* then a Year of Grace? Had redemption suddenly failed? Did these horrible concepts come into their own again as part of the dark inheritance of man?

Now it is that we realise how much better it would be to let the whole matter rest.

But will it let us rest? Why, if not for the glory of his Maker, did Parson Ruddle write down his narrative at all? He must have intended something, or why should we now look on the world with changed eyes?

For the shreds and remnants of just such things are still hauntingly about us. We do occasionally see, flesh in our midst, these women from whose eyes something underived looks out, something out of line,

carried over as it were from Chaos, omitted from the inventory of Creation, never since wholly absorbed into the Divine Order. It flickers like half-quenched wildfire at intervals through the world, throwing its murky beam into the forgotten recesses of our nature. It mocks our love and compassion ; and men have been known to swear that they have seen that woman-shape, dark and pallid, and with beautiful baleful brows huddled close like the black " berry " of a swan, that has been able to make its way to their bedside in the dead of night, though the door of the chamber was bolted and barred. " It was a dream," they still their fears afterwards ; but it was no dream while it stood there, offering the key of the Nadir between its cruel lips, the discarnate kiss of sin.

And if in Babylon or Sidon, why not in Launceston when Plague walked the earth and death was let loose ? Was Mr. Ruddle a liar that he should write these things down ? Or was he beguiled or bemused ? If you think so, read his words. Come with him to the Quartils once more. For this was the manner of his going there :

The morning being come, lest we should alarm the family of servants, they (the parents) went under the pretence of seeing a field of wheat, and I took my horse, and fetched a compass another way, and so met at the stile we had appointed. Thence we all four walked leisurely into the Quartils, and had passed above half the field before the ghost made its appearance. It then came over the stile just before us, and moved with that swiftness

that by the time we had gone six or seven steps it passed by. I immediately turned my head and ran after it, with the young man by my side; we saw it pass over the stile at which we entered, but no farther. I stept upon the hedge at one place and he at another, but could discern nothing; whereas I dare aver that the swiftest horse in England could not have conveyed himself out of sight in that short space of time. Two things I did note in this day's appearance (1) That a spaniel dog that followed the company unregarded did bark and run away as the spectre passed by. (2) That the motion of the spectre was not gradatim, or by steps and moving of the feet, but a kind of gliding, as children upon ice or a boat down a swift river.

That stricken field at six o'clock of a July morning, the spaniel barking, and a clergyman and a youth making a dash for different parts of a hedge to see what had become of something that apparently had the power of omnipresence——

The spectre's own haste to be gone, as if itself now saw reason for fear——

No. It is enough. Criticism has nothing further to say. Visibility, gliding, the dog—we accept them all. It comes in the end to this, that Parson Ruddle saw what he says he saw. And we ourselves are as near to that field as ever we wish to be.

And we have finished with our prying too. We are content that thereafter Parson Ruddle should hold the stage, alone and to the end. "*The parents,*" we read, "*were strangely affrighted, who had known this Dorothy*

Dingley in her lifetime and now plainly saw her features. After that they went no more. We can well believe it. We do not want to know what kind of a look that was that passed between the mother and this persecutor of her sons. It must have been livid with recognition, hate and farewell.

VI

If only we possessed a picture of the parson, in his broad hat and starched bands and high-heeled shoes ! If only we had the description of somebody who knew him in the flesh as he lived ! But there remains nothing of him but his plain honest English style and the directness and truth-speaking and simplicity of heart that shine through it. With these and "such lawful means as God hath discovered, and learned men have successfully practised in these uncommon cases," he was prepared to undertake his inconceivable task. And he lost no time about it.

The next morning, being Thursday, I went out very early by myself, and walked about an hour's space in meditation and prayer in the field next adjoining the Quartils. Soon after five I stepped over the stile into the disturbed field.

And there is no need for him to point that commanding finger, bidding us leave him. If we dared we would not stay. Already we have "listened in" on this ancient story too presumptuously, and must down on our knees for the violation we have done. Terror, like Apollyon, straddled across the breadth of that Way,

and it was for Parson Ruddle to beware lest his own soul should be spilt. And we know as we turn away that he was facing the powers of darkness, not for the succour of a tormented boy, not for the quiet of a Cornish field, but in some sort for the safety and peace of heart of all mankind alive or to be.

"O Lord make speed to save us."

"O Lord make haste to help us."

"Let us pray."

The rest is set down without comment.

I had not gone above thirty or forty paces before the ghost appeared at the farther stile. I spake to it with a loud voice, in some such sentences as the way of these dealings directed me; whereupon it approached but slowly, and when I came near it moved not. I spake again, and it answered in a voice neither very audible nor intelligible. I was not in the least terrified, and therefore persisted, until it spake again and gave me satisfaction. The discourse lasted about a quarter of an hour. But the work could not be finished at this time; wherefore the same evening, an hour after sunset, it met me again in the same place. After a few words on each side, it quietly vanished, and neither doth appear since, nor ever will more, to any man's disturbance.

"The sparrow hath found her an house."

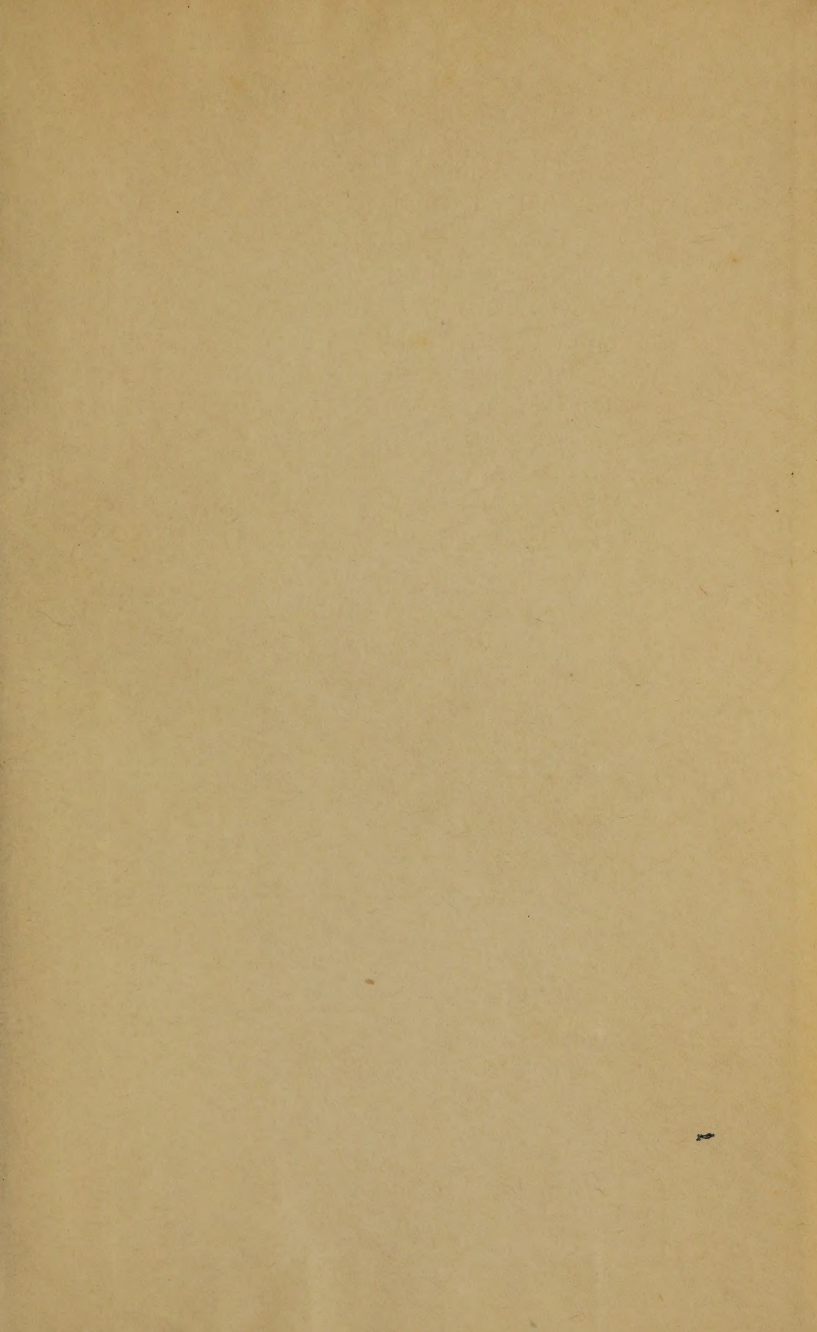
"And the turtle a nest where she may lay her young."

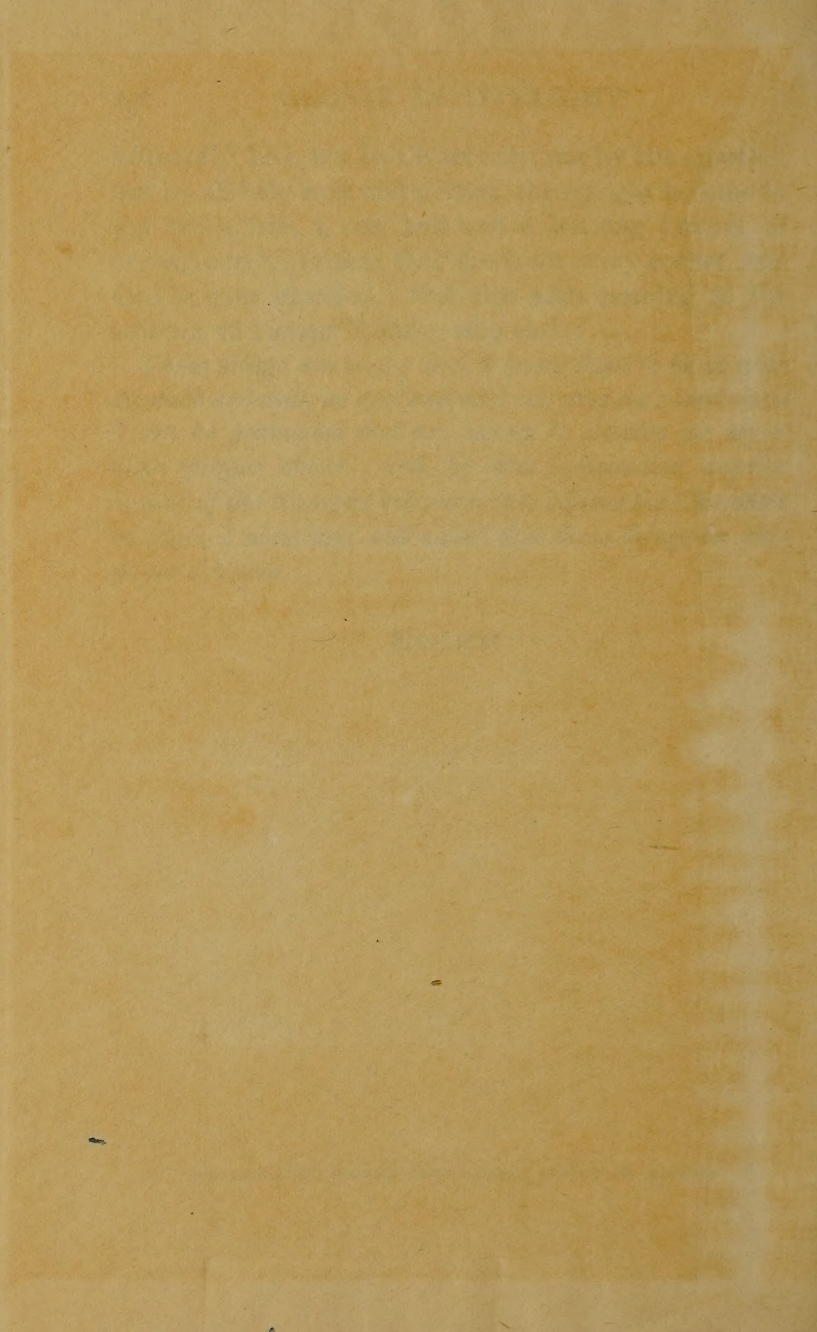
It may be that, in the Year of Grace 1924, we take down an old book from a shelf, and read, in the Form
"Quae ordo dicitur Domus a Daemone perturbatum

liberandi," how, not by Christ only, nor by His apostles, but by all holy men and women, the upright become to the evil spirits a new hell and a burning furnace of eternal horror, so that they flee from every corner, and God is ever glorified. But this adds nothing to the relation of Parson Ruddle, who ends :

These things are true ; and I know them to be so with as much certainty as eyes and ears can give me ; and until I can be persuaded that my senses do deceive me about their proper object, and by that persuasion deprive myself of the strongest inducement to believe the Christian religion, I must and will assert that these things in this paper are true.

EXPLICIT





1st Ed

7.50

